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# Dispelling myths: Indigenous students' engagement with university

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# RESEARCH BRIEFING

Australasian Survey of Student Engagement

Volume 10 **April 2011**

## Highlights

- Indigenous students are engaged with learning at a similar or slightly higher level than their non-Indigenous peers, and report levels of overall satisfaction equal to or higher than their peers.
- Despite such positive findings, Indigenous students are more likely to seriously consider leaving their institution. While only 1.9 per cent of Indigenous students actually plan to leave before completion, Indigenous students continue to be less likely to complete than their non-Indigenous peers.
- In comparison to non-Indigenous students, Indigenous students are more likely to be female, to be older; and to come from regional or remote Australia. They are more likely to be studying externally, with evidence that many are doing this via 'Block Mode' intensive programs. Only 58 per cent reported studying full-time and on-campus, compared to 74 per cent of non-Indigenous domestic students.
- Indigenous students report markedly higher levels of engagement in relation to work-integrated learning. This difference is probably due to the fact that the older Indigenous students are often employed before commencing study, and select courses directly relevant to their work.
- The AUSSE results provide considerable grounds for optimism in terms of Indigenous students' engagement in Australian higher education. Further research is needed to explore areas of concern and also to strengthen the evidence base regarding factors related to Indigenous success in higher education. This could be done by devising new questionnaire items for national surveys such as the AUSSE.

## *Dispelling myths: Indigenous students' engagement with university*

### Introduction

In 2009, over ten thousand Indigenous students<sup>1</sup> were enrolled in higher education across Australia, representing a 10 per cent increase since 2008 (DEEWR, 2009). The 2009 AUSSE (Radloff & Coates, 2010; see Appendix 1) found that, in comparison to their non-Indigenous peers; Indigenous students are just as satisfied with their overall university experience; are engaged with learning at similar levels; and report higher general learning outcomes (especially in work-related skills). These, with other findings discussed below, are clear cause for optimism.

Yet, Indigenous students still represent fewer than one per cent of all higher education students (DEEWR, 2009). This proportion remains sadly short of the 2.5 per cent of Indigenous people in the broader population (IHEAC, 2006). Indigenous Australians, in other words, continue to be under-represented in higher education. Indigenous students' attrition, retention and completion rates are also areas of concern. The attrition rate for first year Indigenous students is estimated to be 35 to 39 per cent (IHEAC, 2006). Indigenous students have an overall completion rate of less than 50 per cent, compared to 72 per cent among non-Indigenous Australian domestic students (Radloff & Coates, 2010).

<sup>1</sup> The term 'Indigenous' is used in this AUSSE Research Briefing to refer to Australian students who are of self-declared Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background.

# Indigenous students' engagement

It has been known for years now that students who engage more frequently in educationally effective practices get better grades, are more satisfied, and are more likely to persist with their studies. It is also known that while engagement is positively linked to desired outcomes for all types of students, historically underserved students tend to benefit more than majority students (Kuh, Kinzie, Cruce, Shoup & Gonyea, 2006). In the case of Indigenous Australians, positive responses in relation to engagement and satisfaction are not necessarily accompanied by the overall levels of persistence and completion one would expect. Moreover, New Zealand Māori students surveyed in the AUSSE reveal similar characteristics: Māori students report even higher levels of overall satisfaction than Indigenous Australians but at the same time are more likely than their non-Māori peers to consider leaving their institution.

In relation to Indigenous students' overall engagement in Australasian higher education, therefore, there are certainly pleasing developments – but there are also anomalies which require explanation. This AUSSE Research Briefing explores complex issues relating to Indigenous Australians surveyed in the AUSSE, and draws on a range of evidence to offer possible explanations. The briefing aims to:

- identify areas where Indigenous students appear to be engaging with their study in significantly different ways to non-Indigenous students, and offer possible explanations for such differences;
- note areas of engagement where there are no meaningful differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students;
- utilise various sources of data (including open-ended responses in the AUSSE; other national surveys; and research with Indigenous academics) to highlight likely influences on Indigenous engagement; and
- draw particular attention to factors such as 'Block Mode' of study; the roles of Indigenous centres and staff; and how links with community may influence student engagement.

This briefing offers new insights, but it also affirms that more research is needed. More specifically, we conclude by suggesting new questionnaire items for future national survey instruments. The complexities and contradictions inherent in this important area of higher education require us to be both nuanced in our interpretations, and diligent in obtaining more information.

## Characteristics of Indigenous students

Of the 2,480 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students sampled in the 2009 AUSSE, 526 responded, giving a response rate of 21 per cent. Written comments were volunteered by 355 respondents, offering further valuable insights.

As Indigenous Australian students tend to have different demographic and educational backgrounds to non-Indigenous Australian students, a careful effort was made to construct a useful comparison group of 485 non-Indigenous students for the purposes of this briefing. To help control for any extraneous differences between the groups, this non-Indigenous sample was matched in terms of key demographic characteristics and educational contexts. In other words, we tried to explore whether Indigenous students' engagement seems different from other students merely because of their socio-demographic circumstances, or because of factors related more directly to their Indigenousness.

Various figures and text in this briefing refer to three-way comparisons between Indigenous students; the 'matched' non-Indigenous sample; and all domestic, non-Indigenous students. International students are excluded from this analysis.

## Demographic characteristics

When compared to all their non-Indigenous counterparts, Table 1 shows that Indigenous students are more likely to be female, to be of lower socioeconomic status (SES), and to be older. Indigenous students are also more likely to come from provincial or remote areas and somewhat more likely to be the first in their family to attend university.

**Table I** Selected Indigenous and non-Indigenous domestic Australian students' demographic characteristics

Demographic	Indigenous students	Non-Indigenous students
Female	73%	70%
Low SES	27%	18%
Age 25 years or older	43%	22%
Mean age	28 years	24 years
Median age	22 years	20 years
Provincial	29%	22%
Remote	5%	1%
First in family	56%	47%

Understandably, low SES routinely equates to financial insecurity. In addition, being older often means having dependents, which in turn can increase financial pressures. Indigenous students are significantly more likely to spend time on providing care for dependents (on average, 11 hours per week compared to six hours for domestic, non-Indigenous students). These and other factors combine to make Indigenous students more likely to receive government and university financial support, than non-Indigenous students. Despite such assistance, and their own considerable commitments to paid work (see below), Indigenous students are still more likely to consider leaving their university for financial reasons.

The AUSSE findings are confirmed by a recent Student Finances Survey (Universities Australia, 2007) which, while noting 'evidence of a strong commitment to completing a university education' on the part of Indigenous students, also reported that: 'Overall, Indigenous students reported more financial difficulties and pressures than non-Indigenous students'.

Australian students, in general, typically work for pay, but Indigenous students do so at a slightly higher rate than their non-Indigenous peers. For example, compared to the 10 per cent of domestic, non-Indigenous students who work 30 or more hours per week, 15 per cent of Indigenous students do so. Generally speaking, however, the number of hours spent working for pay is not an area of major difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Greater differences arise in the relationship of paid work to study, as will be discussed below.

### **Indigenous modes of study, including 'Block Mode'**

Indigenous students are more likely to come from provincial or remote Australia, and to be studying externally. Only 58 per cent of the sample reported studying full-time and on-campus, compared to 74 per cent of non-Indigenous domestic students surveyed, and 65 per cent of the non-Indigenous matched sample.

It is important to note that many universities offer Indigenous-specific programs run in 'Block Mode', a mode of study which differs from 'mainstream' courses on campus where Indigenous students participate alongside their non-Indigenous peers. Block mode students are believed to constitute about one third of all Indigenous students, but most national surveys do not so far include items relating to this. Because of the large proportion of Indigenous students who are studying via block mode, it is likely that responses to the AUSSE are influenced to some degree by this particular group of students.

Block Mode programs combine short, intensive residential periods (blocks) on campus, with extensive periods of study off campus. This is helpful for mature age students, particularly – but not only – those from regional and remote areas who have family and community responsibilities. Block Mode also enables Indigenous students to maintain jobs which may be essential for the support of their families, and to study curriculum directly relevant to community-based employment and careers.

Staff in Indigenous centres usually play a key role in organising and teaching such programs, as well as providing support for students often new to tertiary study. Indigenous staff in particular disciplines may also contribute to Block Mode programs. Blocks are sometimes held outside regular term times, so students and staff outside Indigenous centres may be largely unaware of either the programs or the students.

*'...the fact that it is offered with blocks (intensives) which fits in with work commitments.'*

We believe it is important to understand the role of Block Mode programs in making it feasible for many Indigenous students to enrol in university study, and in enhancing their engagement once enrolled. However, it should also be reiterated that a majority of Indigenous students are enrolled in full-time, on-campus courses like most school leavers and, indeed, like most students.

# Indigenous students' engagement

## Indigenous students' preferred areas of study

Compared with non-Indigenous students, Indigenous students who responded to the AUSSE were more likely to be studying in the humanities; slightly more likely to be studying education, in a field of health, or in the creative arts; and less likely to be studying science, engineering or business (Figure 1).

Despite these differences, Figure 1 shows that most Indigenous respondents were enrolled in the same four broad fields of education as most domestic, non-Indigenous respondents, namely: humanities, health, business, and education. Although DEEWR's 2008 statistics for Indigenous fields of study are based on a larger institutional population than in the AUSSE, the national statistics provide a very similar picture to the AUSSE.

The AUSSE data confirm that in relation to a number of demographic and educational characteristics, statistically significant differences exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. In many cases these differences are well-known and already documented elsewhere. However the AUSSE figures

also indicate that nearly three-quarters of Indigenous respondents are *not* of low SES; and that, in terms of having parents who attended university (an important predictor of student success), 44 per cent declare that they are not the first in their family to attend university.

## Indigenous students' engagement

### Broad insights

The AUSSE findings presented in Figure 2 show that – as mentioned earlier – Indigenous students are engaged in many types of learning activities at a similar (or very slightly higher) frequency than their non-Indigenous peers. First-year Indigenous students, for example, report almost the same levels of academic challenge as students in the non-Indigenous matched sample (47%, compared to 48%); and of active learning (35%, compared to 37%). The authors of the 2009 First Year Experience (FYE) survey (James et al., 2010), commenting on the high expectations of Indigenous students, note that only four per cent of Indigenous students agree that 'university just hasn't lived up to my expectations', compared with 17 per cent of domestic,

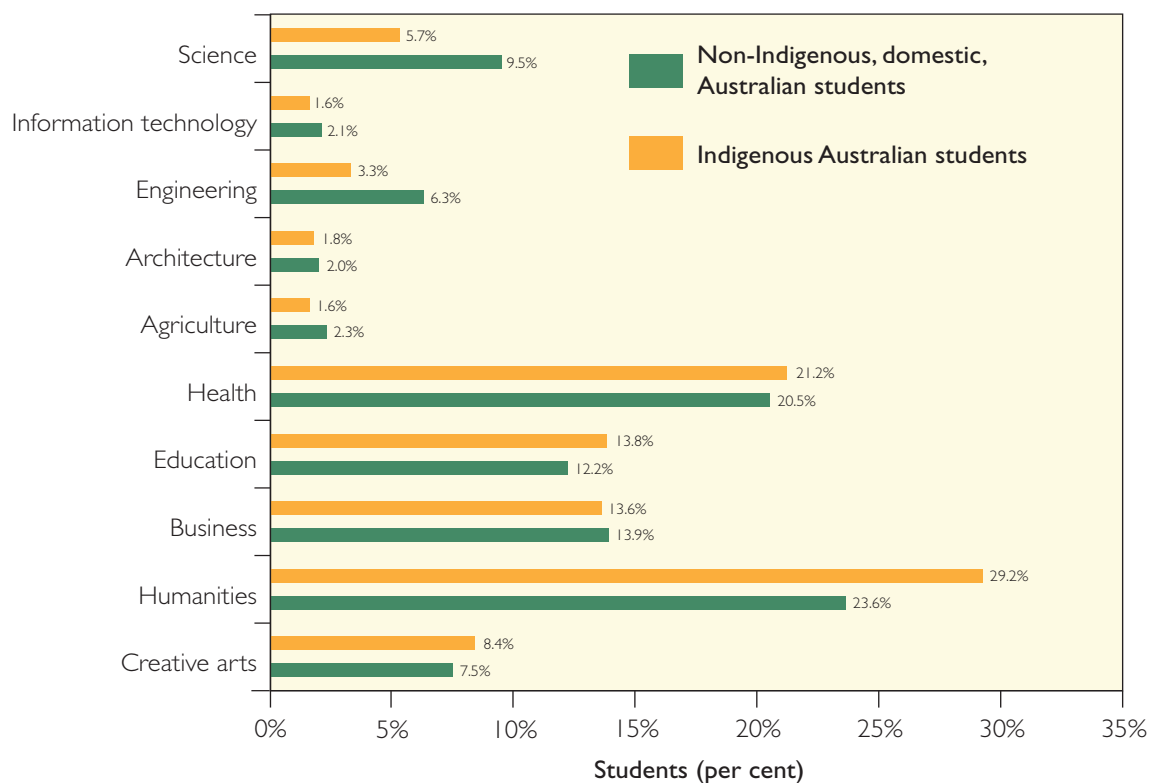
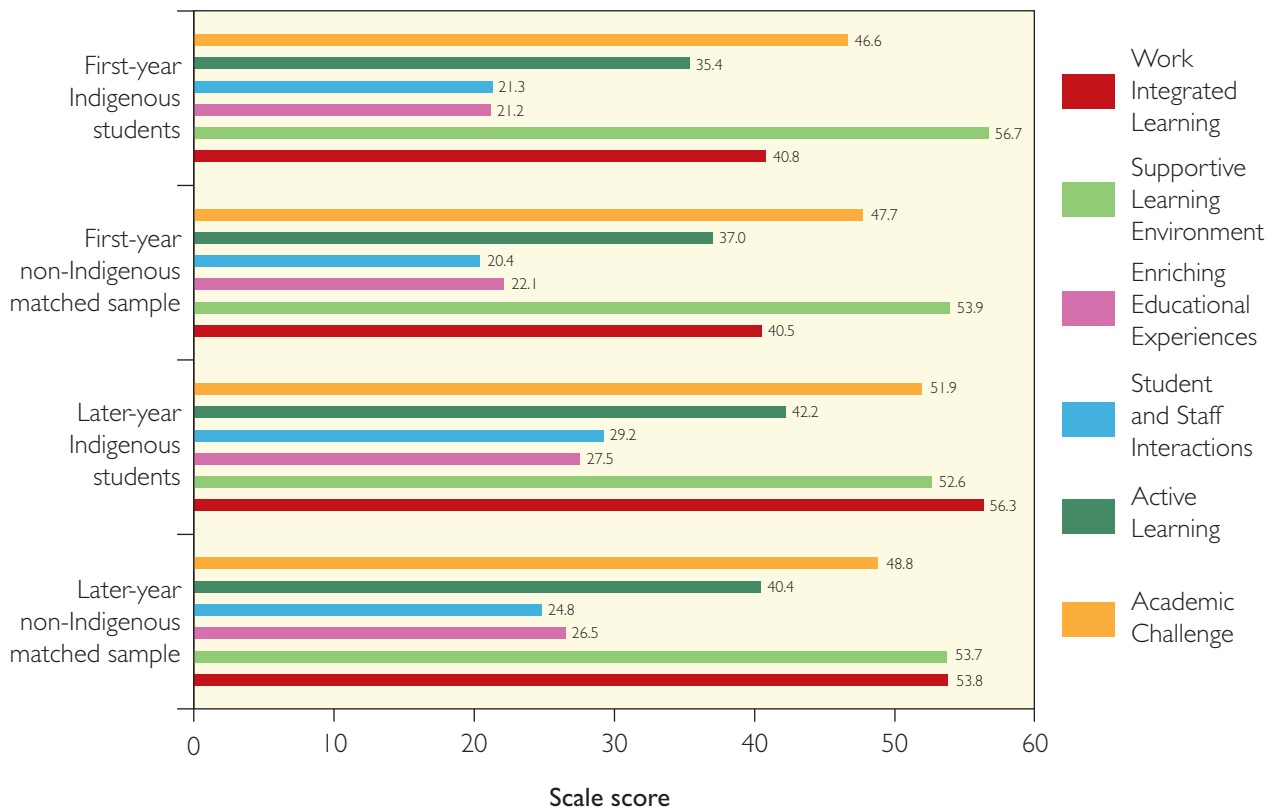


Figure 1 Indigenous and non-Indigenous domestic Australian students' broad field of education



**Figure 2** Indigenous and non-Indigenous matched sample average student engagement scores

non-Indigenous students. James et al. found Indigenous first year students to be motivated, optimistic and committed – while also liable to experience ‘interrelated pressures’ affecting their studies.

There are significant differences between Indigenous students and the non-Indigenous matched sample on the AUSSE engagement scales in Figure 2. The most meaningful of these are in relation to higher levels of agreement from Indigenous respondents on the scales for student-staff interactions, and for work-integrated learning ( $p < 0.01$  for both). We discuss both these issues in more detail below. We will also consider what the engagement findings indicate in relation to the supportive learning environment, which we believe is highly relevant to Indigenous student experiences in that it incorporates the role of Indigenous centres.

### *Indigenous students’ academic interactions with teaching staff*

Compared with domestic, non-Indigenous peers, Indigenous students are significantly more likely to ‘often’ or ‘very often’ report discussing grades with teaching staff (33%, compared to 22% in the non-Indigenous matched sample); work with teaching staff on non-coursework activities (11%, compared to 6%); and discuss ideas with teaching staff (15%, compared to 11%). Later-year Indigenous students are more likely to report positively on their study-related

interactions with teachers (29%, compared with 25% of domestic non-Indigenous peers). Given that teaching and learning lies at the core of university education, it is interesting to review open-ended responses given by Indigenous students for more insights into these issues.

Of 526 Indigenous AUSSE respondents, 355 provided comments to at least one of the following questions:

- What are the best aspects of how your university engages students in learning?
- What could be done to improve how your university engages students?

Further analysis of this qualitative data is needed, but interestingly the vast majority of comments (over 90%) were *not* related specifically or directly to Indigenous issues. By this we mean comments such as those expressing satisfaction with teachers who are ‘sensitive to Indigenous learners’, or those calling for ‘more Aboriginal content in the curriculum’.

Comments indicate that Indigenous students are particularly appreciative of high quality lectures, prompt responses from teaching staff, efficient use of technology and well run discussions. In addition to praising these aspects, Indigenous students also suggested areas for improvement including a reduction in workload; an improvement in the quantity and speed of feedback; and – in common with many other students – ‘No boring lectures’. None of these themes will be unfamiliar to anyone working in the higher education sector.

# Indigenous students' engagement

The 2009 CEQ survey of Australian graduates found that Indigenous and non-Indigenous graduates report very similar levels of agreement regarding good teaching (54% and 53% mean percentage agreement, respectively) and clear goals and standards (51% and 51%). Indigenous graduates provided noticeably higher scores on the scales for appropriate assessment, appropriate workload, and student support, but the CEQ report authors draw attention to the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates allocate their lowest and highest scores to exactly the same scales as do their non-Indigenous classmates (Coates & Edwards, 2010).

As distinct from academic interactions with teaching staff, the issue of Indigenous students' *relationships* with their teachers will be discussed below, where we will also consider whether those teachers are likely to be Indigenous or not.

## Indigenous students and work-integrated learning

As noted, one of the most marked differences in levels of engagement (Figure 2) relates to the higher levels of work-integrated learning among later-year students. Indigenous students had a mean of 56.3 on this scale, while domestic, non-Indigenous later-year students had a mean of 50.5. The main difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students was the frequency with which Indigenous students blended academic learning with workplace experience. 44 per cent of Indigenous students reported doing so either 'often' or 'very often', significantly higher than the 35 per cent of students in the non-Indigenous matched sample who reported doing so frequently.

The data also show that the relationship between academic work and paid work is stronger for Indigenous students who, as mentioned earlier, are more likely to work for pay than their domestic, non-Indigenous peers. Both groups work for pay off campus for an average of 11.7 hours per week, but Indigenous students work on campus slightly more frequently. Indigenous students spend an average of one hour a week working on campus, compared to an average of 0.5 hours among students in the non-Indigenous matched sample, and 0.8 hours for all domestic, non-Indigenous students.

Looking more closely at only those students who report working for pay, we find that a mere one third of Indigenous students (33%) say their work is 'not at

all' related to their field of study, compared with 41 per cent of domestic, non-Indigenous students. Conversely, 43 per cent of Indigenous students say that their paid work is 'quite a bit' or 'very much' related to their field of study, compared with only 29 per cent of domestic, non-Indigenous students.

These findings may be partly due to the influence of Indigenous students studying in Block Mode whose rationale for course choice is often linked to developing professional skills related to jobs they already have. Importantly, students located and working in provincial or remote Australia are enabled, via Block Mode, to pursue studies relevant to their careers whilst only spending a few weeks per year away from family and from the communities where they hope to make an enhanced contribution. It is therefore possible that the findings on work-integrated learning are linked to the importance of community for Indigenous learners, as will be discussed below. As a consequence, rather than *preparing* Indigenous students for employment and careers, universities may instead be perceived as helping many who are already employed, to fulfil their aspirations in developing higher level skills.

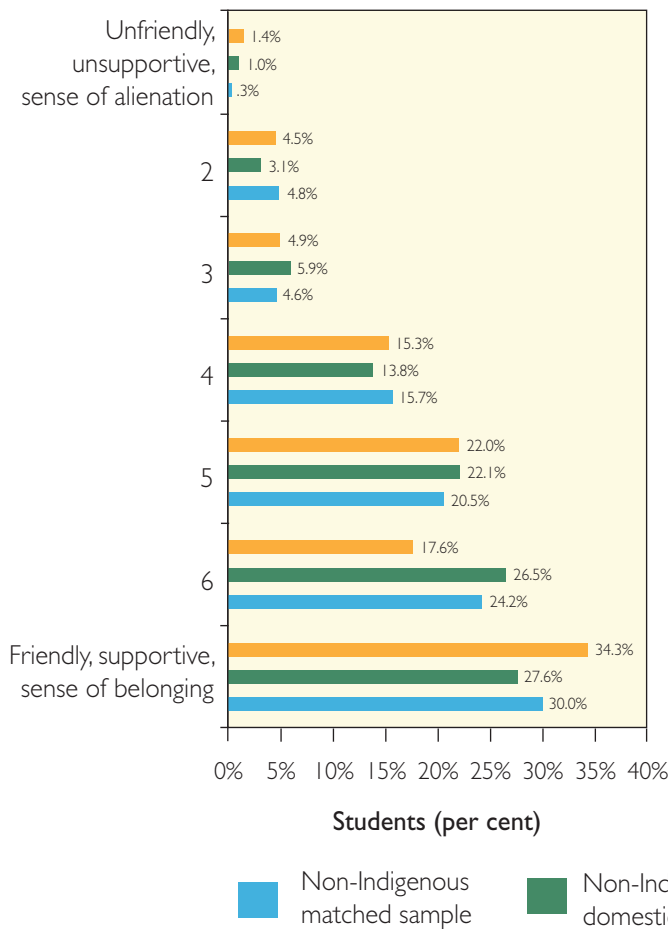
*'Being able to study in a place that is dedicated to the empowerment of my people.'*

## Relating to other students

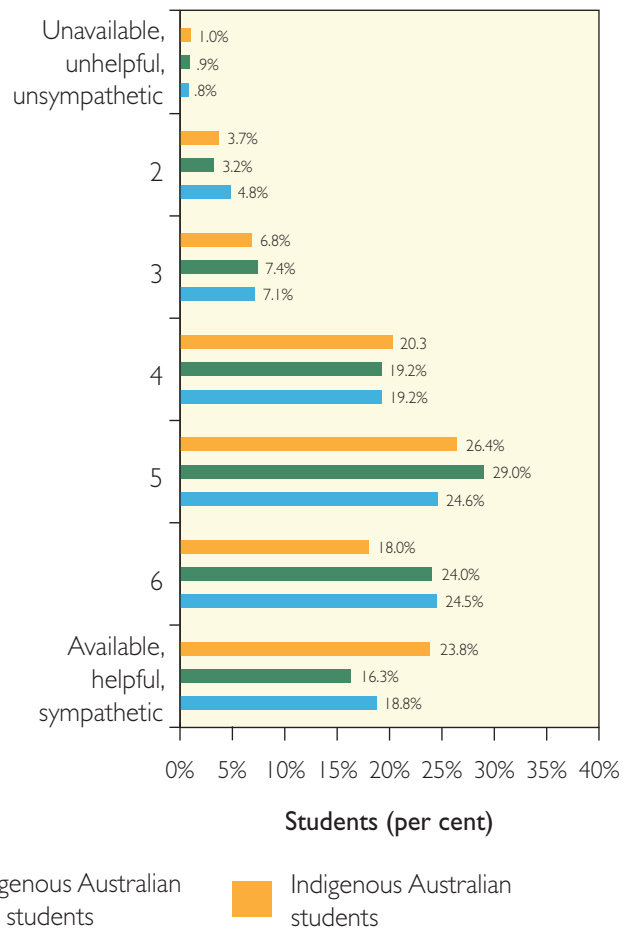
The findings in Figure 3 highlight key aspects of the supportive learning environment, namely the question of students' relationships with other students and with teachers, respectively. There is no significant difference between Indigenous and the matched student sample's overall ratings of the quality of their relationships with other students, or with teaching staff.

Students of all backgrounds report rather more positively on their relationships with other students than they do in relation to teaching staff. The percentage distributions are pleasing in showing that – for example – over a third of Indigenous students (34%) rate their fellow-students very highly in terms of friendliness and supportiveness, compared with only 28 per cent of the non-Indigenous matched sample. These very positive Indigenous student responses could well include Block

### Relationships with other students



### Relationships with teachers



**Figure 3** Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' ratings of quality of relationships with students and teaching staff

Mode students whose relationships are mainly with Indigenous peers – but we cannot be sure.

cognitive development, and interactions with culturally diverse peers are among the most salient of those experiences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

*'Bringing together Indigenous students from all over Australia, creating networks, new friendship and support groups to assist us as we move into further studies.'*

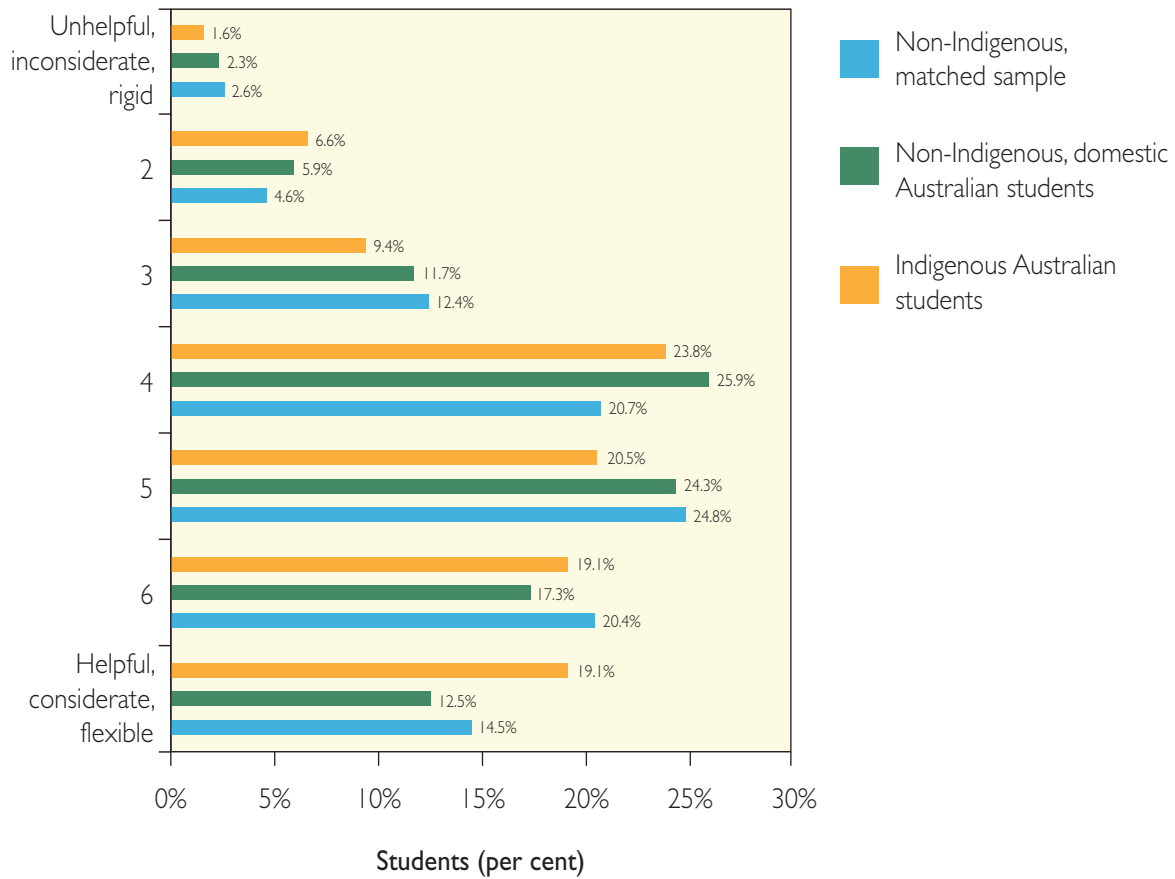
*'As an Indigenous person I feel we could be more immersed with mainstream/fulltime studying students when at residential so we have more opportunity to mingle, socialise...I believe it could dispel a few myths about Indigenous people (students) who are there to study for the same reasons...'*

In the context of student-to-student relationships, it is of interest to refer back to differences of significance in the Enriching Educational Experiences engagement scale (Figure 3). In contrast with non-Indigenous students, 57 per cent of Indigenous students say that they 'often' or 'very often' have conversations with students from a different ethnic group, compared to 48 per cent in the matched sample. Further significant differences arise in relation to having conversations with students very different from themselves (in terms of religion, politics or values), with 54 per cent of Indigenous students saying they do so 'often' or 'very often', compared to only 45 per cent of the matched non-Indigenous sample. Such conversations (as well as more formal interactions) have educational effects. Diversity experiences are known to positively impact

It is to be expected that students belonging to an ethnic or racial minority will report engaging with those who represent the majority culture. If we imagine a situation where there are only one or two Indigenous students in, say, a School of Medicine, how could such interactions be avoided? The widening of higher education participation adds to the likelihood of broader encounters with diversity. In relation to the 40 to 50 per cent of Indigenous students who say they do *not* experience such encounters, we speculate – but again cannot be sure – that these may include Block Mode students.



# Indigenous students' engagement



**Figure 4** Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' ratings of quality of relationships with administrative personnel and services

*'They encourage, guide and help when you have a problem.'*

*'The understanding of the diverse backgrounds that students come from and valuing their contributions.'*

*'Interested and knowledgeable lecturers who genuinely want you to achieve your best.'*

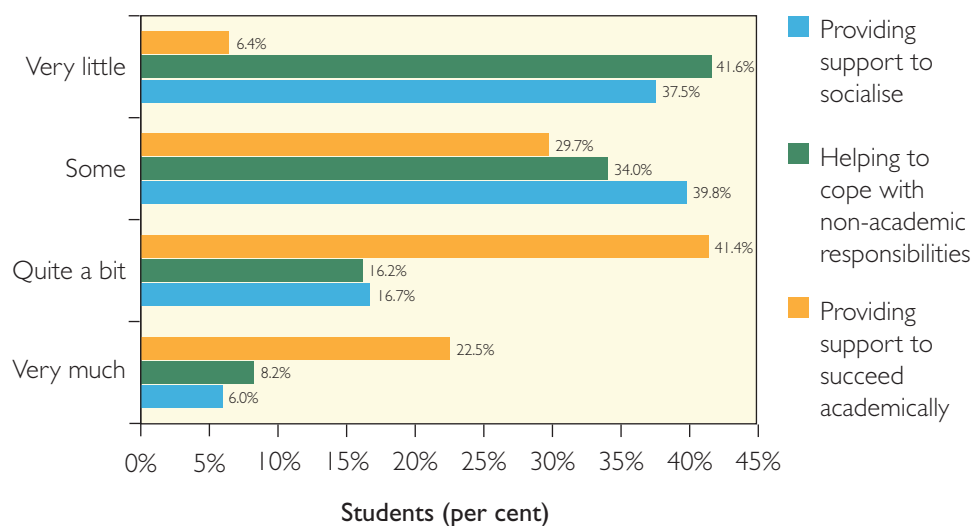
## Relationships with teaching staff

Another dimension of the supportive learning environment involves relationships with teachers. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are quite positive about such relationships (Figure 3) with no significant inter-group differences. As mentioned earlier, Indigenous comments about the 'best aspects' of university included many enthusiastic endorsements of teachers.

It is of concern that one student's reason for considering withdrawing was: 'ethnocentrically ignorant lectures',

but there is little evidence in the AUSSE that this represents a broader pattern. Generally, both qualitative and quantitative data from the AUSSE illuminate what we already know from other research: namely, that positive teacher-student interaction is the most important factor in effective teaching (Hattie, 2008).

It is not clear whether Indigenous AUSSE respondents are referring to relationships with teachers who are themselves Indigenous, or not. For students in 'mainstream' disciplines, the teachers (and fellow students) will almost inevitably be *non*-Indigenous. This is partly because the proportion of Indigenous academics in the Australian university system is miniscule (as is the proportion of Indigenous students) – namely less than one per cent (IHEAC, 2008). It is also because most Indigenous teaching staff are located in small Indigenous centres, rather than in 'mainstream' faculties, schools or departments (Asmar & Page, 2009).



**Figure 5** Indigenous students' ratings of the extent to which institution emphasises various types of support

### Relationships with administrative staff

As Figure 4 shows, Indigenous students are significantly more likely to report having positive relationships with administrative personnel than their non-Indigenous peers.

Administrative staff may work in central units such as a library, servicing students from across a university, or within faculties and departments.

A small but important group work within Indigenous centres, where there are almost always non-academic staff positions designated to work with Indigenous students. Centre staff are usually, but not always, Indigenous themselves. Published research suggests that the very high levels of support provided to Indigenous students by such centres and staff (including the academics), is probably underestimated (Page & Asmar, 2008). This issue will be further explored in the next section.

*'Student Services are compassionate and ever so supportive; encouraging when one is at one's most fragile state of being.'*

### Indigenous student support and the role of Indigenous centres

The 2009 CEQ survey of graduates found that Indigenous graduates provided 'noticeably higher' scores on the student support scale, than non-Indigenous graduates did (Coates & Edwards, 2010). The AUSSE findings in Figure 5 show Indigenous students' responses regarding various kinds of support. Most Indigenous students (64%) feel that their institution provides 'quite a bit' of or 'very much' support for them to succeed academically, with 30 per cent feeling there is 'some' support provided. Only six per cent say that 'very little' support is given. Universities will – and should – find this a pleasing result.

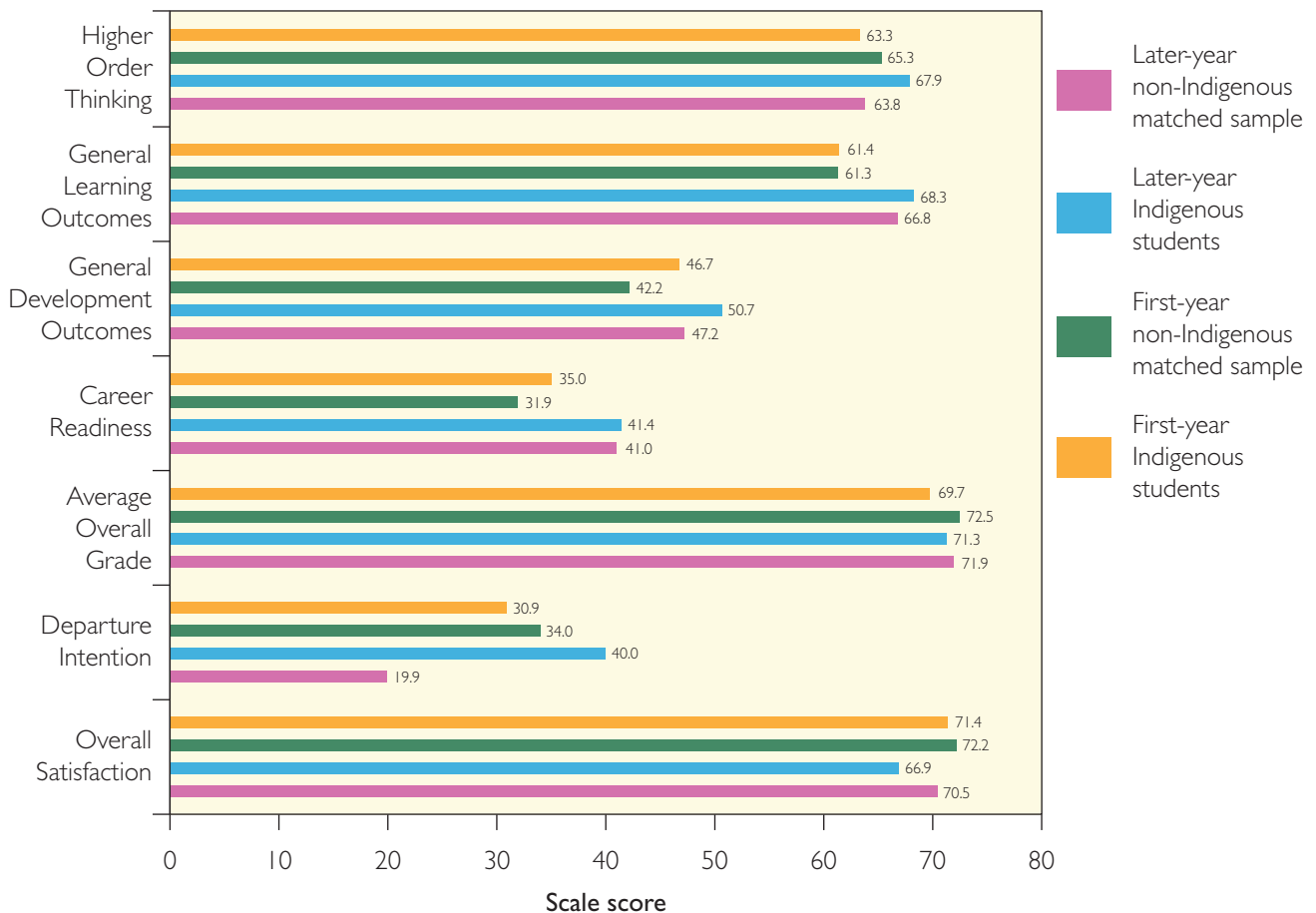
Indigenous students feel that there is far less support provided by their institution to help them cope with their non-academic responsibilities than their non-Indigenous peers do. Forty-two per cent of Indigenous students say they have 'very little' support from their institutions to help them cope with such responsibilities. Regarding the amount of support provided for Indigenous students to socialise; the majority (62%) say that this type of support is emphasised at least 'somewhat'. Indigenous students may or may not prefer more social interactions with non-Indigenous peers over interactions with fellow Indigenous students. Both aspirations are mentioned in the comments. We know of no research into the preferences of non-Indigenous students in this respect.

Another aspect of the Supportive Learning Environment worth noting is this: there is a direct link between how students perceive institutional support, and whether or not they intend to depart prior to completion (Figure 6). The issue of support, therefore, is far from peripheral to the optimising of Indigenous student engagement. Rather, it is crucial.

High levels of support are known to be integral to the work of staff, including academics, in Indigenous centres (Page & Asmar, 2008). One third of all the AUSSE open-ended Indigenous comments referring to Indigenous issues specifically mentioned these centres as among 'best aspects' of how their universities engaged them in learning. We therefore have reasons to believe it is within Indigenous centres that most Indigenous support happens. Indeed, this is exactly what such centres are set up – and funded – to provide. We need further data in this respect, since national surveys do not usually ask about students' use of Indigenous centres, although individual institutions are known to do so.

*'The (Indigenous) Centre is the best engagement I have received. I receive ongoing support and encouragement from the staff every day.'*

# Indigenous students' engagement



**Figure 6** Indigenous and non-Indigenous matched sample's average student outcomes scores

## Indigenous student outcomes

Moving from aspects of engagement to students' self-reported outcomes, we again find few significant differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in many areas. It can be seen from Figure 6, however, that Indigenous students report higher levels of general development and somewhat higher levels of general learning outcomes – especially among later year students.

The main areas of difference are for general development outcomes. This suggests that Indigenous students feel more strongly that their experience at university has helped them develop their general skills, than non-Indigenous students do. This could be related to the fact that Indigenous students (particularly those in Block Mode) do not always arrive in university via traditional pathways, and as a result may have less formal education at entry point. The FYE survey

(James et al., 2010) reminds us that: 'Indigenous people continue to be significantly disadvantaged in the school sector'. Research in the United States confirms that first-generation students appear to derive more benefits from attending college than other students do, and that the positive impacts (such as enhanced academic

*'As an Aboriginal student there are many aspects of influence that cause students to fail or simply leave university. [My university] is aware of these socio economic and family influences and provides a wide support base to overcome these obstacles.'*

confidence) become more apparent with later-year students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). A similar pattern is apparent in Figure 6.

## The influence of community

The most striking difference in terms of general development outcomes is the extent to which Indigenous students' experience at their institution has increased their ability to contribute to the welfare of their community. The AUSSE found that Indigenous students (47%) were significantly more likely than non-Indigenous students (37% in both the non-Indigenous matched sample and among all non-Indigenous domestic students) to report that their learning experiences at university had enabled them to contribute 'quite a bit' or 'very much' to the welfare of their community. Indigenous students were also more likely to report that they had 'often' or 'very often' participated in community-based projects – 15 per cent, as compared to only nine per cent among both the non-Indigenous matched sample and all non-Indigenous domestic students.

## Inter-ethnic understanding

Whilst focused on benefits for their communities, Indigenous students were also significantly more likely to say that their experience at their institution has contributed to their understanding of people of other ethnic backgrounds, with 56 per cent per cent saying it has contributed 'quite a bit' or 'very much', compared to 48 per cent of all non-Indigenous students and 50 per cent of the non-Indigenous matched sample. This ties in with the findings mentioned earlier regarding Indigenous students' greater likelihood of having conversations with those different from themselves.

*'...for all students to complete all work required of them in gaining their degrees to take their expertise back to their communities.'*

## Departure intentions

As mentioned, despite the many encouraging indicators of Indigenous student engagement, Indigenous attrition, retention and completion rates are all matters of ongoing concern. Indigenous students have an overall completion rate, for example, of less than 50 per cent, compared to 72 per cent for Australian domestic students (AUSSE, 2010); and IHEAC (2006) estimates the first year Indigenous attrition rate as over one third.

Students' intentions to depart their institution are always under scrutiny, and even more so with under-represented groups. All first-year students surveyed in the AUSSE reported similar levels of departure intention, but differences emerge in relation to Indigenous later-year students. Of all Indigenous students surveyed in the AUSSE, 37 per cent report that they plan to, or have seriously considered leaving their

current institution before finishing their qualification, compared to 29 per cent of non-Indigenous students – a significant difference.

Indigenous students with the following attributes have higher departure intentions than those who do not have those attributes:

- being an external or distance student;
- receiving financial assistance;
- being from a provincial or remote area;
- having a disability;
- being older; and
- being male.

For many Indigenous students (as for non-Indigenous peers) a number of these factors can and do overlap.

## Indigenous reasons for considering departure

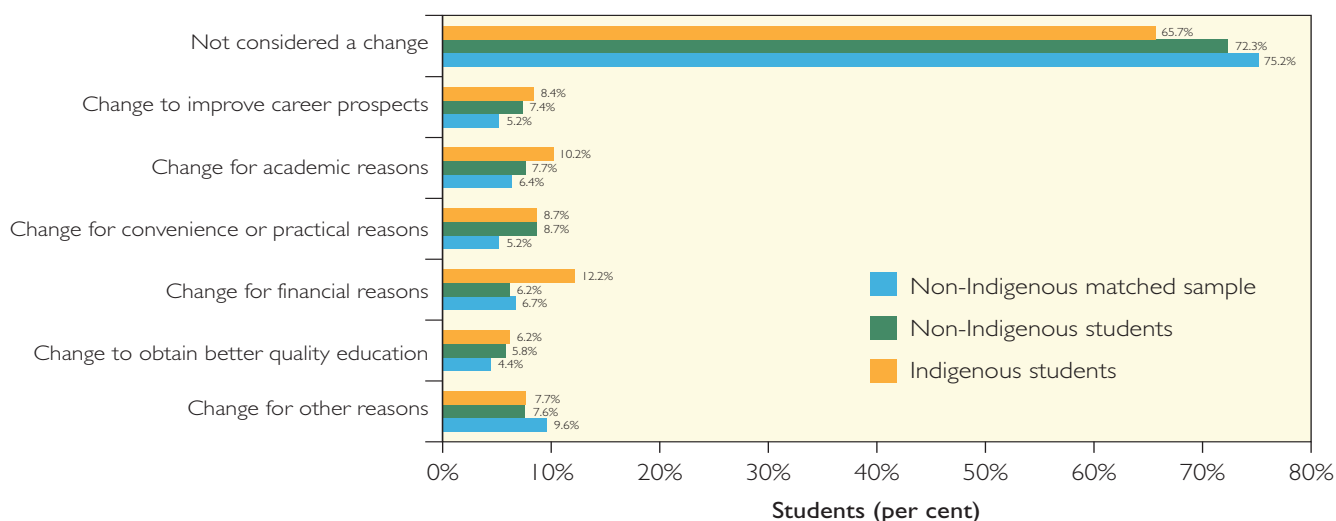
Figure 7 shows the reasons students gave in the AUSSE for considering departure, although it will immediately be pleasingly apparent that a very large majority of all student groups have not considered leaving at all (66% of Indigenous, compared with 72% of all non-Indigenous domestic students and 75% of the non-Indigenous matched sample).

Financial reasons (discussed earlier) are the reasons most cited by Indigenous students (12%) for considering leaving their university, followed by academic reasons (10%). In addition to finances, it is well-known that for many Indigenous learners – as in the Indigenous population at large – chronic health problems make life difficult. Health reasons were not included as an option in the 2009 AUSSE survey as a possible reason for considering departing university (this option was added in the 2010 version of the survey), but a small number of Indigenous students specified this reason in their open-ended comments. The 2009 FYE survey (James et al. 2010) found that health is one of Indigenous students' principal reasons for deferring.

Seventy-four Indigenous students (14% of those responding) self-identified as having a disability, impairment or long-term condition in response to an AUSSE item on this. This group of students was revealed in our analysis to have significantly higher departure intentions than students who do not report a disability – an important finding.

Written comments identified a wide range of 'other' reasons for considering leaving, such as: family crisis; seeking more clinical placements; and needing to be a full time carer. Surveying Indigenous students who have already left university prior to graduating – while logistically difficult – would cast further light on this complex issue.

# Indigenous students' engagement



**Figure 7** Reasons for seriously considering leaving current institution

The news is not all negative. There is a distinction to be made between *considering* leaving and deliberately planning to leave. As mentioned earlier, only 1.9 per cent of Indigenous students surveyed (and only 1.2% of non-Indigenous domestic students) actually plan to leave before completion. Typifying the students who had seriously considered leaving their institution, but who decided to continue, was this Indigenous student who commented:

*'I was interested in doing a double degree ... With further tertiary experience I now believe that it is best that I stayed within my current course.'*

We also lack data on students who defer temporarily, but who return to their studies later. It is useful to think of such students as 'second chance learners', but their decision not to pursue their first 'chance' is usually counted as a failure in official terms. Finally, for some Indigenous students, even partial completion of a course may be counted as a success, in terms of enabling them to contribute work-related skills at a higher level than before – and to enhance their financial status.

## Institutional support and departure intentions

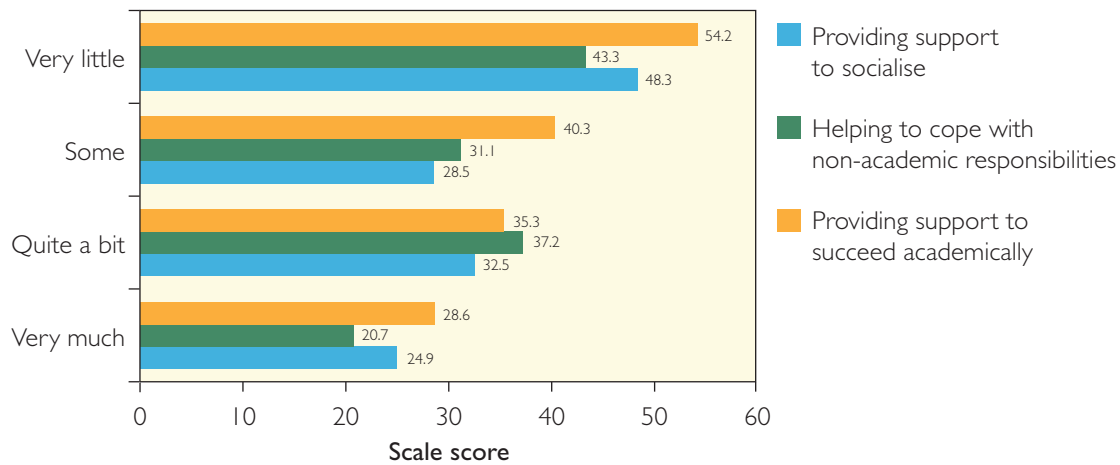
When analysing the supportive learning environment above, we mentioned the link between how students perceive the support provided by their institution, and their possible intentions to depart. Figure 8 provides the evidence for this link. It can be seen that there appears

to be a strong relationship between students' perceived level of institutional support and their departure intentions. In other words, Indigenous students who have seriously considered departing their institution are also less likely to feel highly supported. Students who had seriously considered departing their institution had a mean Supportive Learning Environment scale score of 48.8, significantly lower than students who had not seriously considered departing (56.8).

## Conclusions and next steps

Drawing on both the AUSSE figures, and the open-ended comments, we can say that universities seem to be meeting the expectations of Indigenous students on many levels. Yet we end our analysis of the AUSSE findings by returning to our initial anomaly. The puzzle is that, whilst Indigenous students are very positive about their studies, and are engaged on similar (or in some instances, higher) levels to their peers, they remain more likely to seriously consider leaving. The continued under-representation of Indigenous students in higher education, combined with the greater likelihood of non-completion, remains a serious concern.

The issue of student support appears a crucial one, with vital contributions being made by both administrative and academic staff, whether Indigenous or not. The perhaps under-recognised Indigenous centres provide a strong central pillar for such support systems, with Indigenous staff in the disciplines also playing their part. The question of how best to support the supporters



**Figure 8** Relationship between institutional support and departure intention among Indigenous students

is one that universities might also consider, given the very small number of Indigenous staff in the higher education system as a whole.

This AUSSE Research Briefing is based on 2009 AUSSE data, on which further analysis has been carried out in relation to Indigenous students, although the open-ended comments require further analysis. On the question of whether more data are needed about Indigenous student engagement in general, the answer seems to be both ‘yes’ and ‘no’. On the one hand there is now a wealth of national survey data available. But on the other hand, new survey items and more qualitative analysis would both be very desirable, as we now have quite a clear picture of *what* Indigenous students think about university, but much less idea of *why* they think it.

The AUSSE findings show that on numerous key dimensions of engagement, Indigenous students are simply getting on with their studies in the same way as other students. Nevertheless, the AUSSE has highlighted key areas where there remain significant differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Comparisons with the non-Indigenous matched sample show that many differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students seem to be attributable to other demographic and educational differences between these groups of students. The matched sample controlled for many of the demographic differences between Indigenous non-Indigenous students, and also highlighted areas

of difference that are not accounted for by Indigenous students’ age, sex, mode or type of study. These comparisons can then focus our attention on areas of difference for Indigenous students’ engagement and outcomes.

Areas of engagement where Indigenous and non-Indigenous students differ include:

- modes of study (including Block Mode) and work-integrated learning;
- students’ interactions with teachers, and relationships with administrative staff;
- the motivating effect of community, on achieving outcomes; and
- levels of intention to depart, moderated by institutional support systems.

Here it is clearly vital to deepen our understandings, but *it is precisely in relation to these areas that detailed data are lacking*. Based on the premise that survey questions traditionally asked in the past have not always been those most useful or appropriate for Indigenous research, we now propose ideas on new items for possible inclusion in national surveys (Table 2).

We have already suggested our own explanations of the possible ‘hidden stories’ behind the figures. Tapping into the hidden dimensions of Indigenous engagement and success will help to further dispel some current

**Table 2** Areas of difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student engagement, with suggested issues requiring further data collection

Areas of significant Indigenous/non-Indigenous difference	Issues to explore further in relation to Indigenous students
Work Integrated Learning	How many students study in Block mode, and how it is experienced in relation to engagement
Student and Staff Interactions	The extent to which those interactions are with Indigenous students and staff
General Development	How connections to community affect students’ lives and studies
Departure Intention	The importance of support provided by Indigenous centres and staff, in keeping students engaged The impact of health issues on students’ ability to remain enrolled and engaged

# Indigenous students' engagement

myths, and will also better inform our efforts to attract, support, engage and retain our Indigenous students. In this way, no matter what the difficulties, Indigenous students will achieve the satisfaction of realising not only their own academic potential and personal aspirations for success, but ultimately contribute – together with their non-Indigenous peers – to a better future for the whole of Indigenous Australia.

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## Appendix I: Overview of the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE)

The AUSSE (AUSSE, 2011) was conducted with 25 Australasian universities in 2007, 29 in 2008, 35 in 2009, and 55 higher education providers in 2010. It offers institutions in Australia and New Zealand information on students' involvement with the activities and conditions that empirical research has linked with high-quality learning and development. The concept provides a practical lens for assessing and responding to the significant dynamics, constraints and opportunities facing higher education institutions. The AUSSE provides key insights into what students are actually doing, a structure for framing conversations

about quality, and a stimulus for guiding new thinking about good practice.

Student engagement is an idea specifically focused on learners and their interactions with higher education institutions. Once considered behaviourally in terms of 'time on task', contemporary perspectives now touch on aspects of teaching, the broader student experience, learners' lives beyond university, and institutional support. It is based on the premise that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. While students are seen to be responsible for constructing their knowledge, learning is also seen to depend on institutions and staff generating conditions that stimulate and encourage involvement. Learners are central to the idea of student engagement, which focuses squarely on enhancing individual learning and development.

This perspective draws together decades of research into higher education student learning and development (Pace, 1979; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Ewell and Jones, 1996; Astin, 1985; Coates, 2006, 2010; Kuh, 2008). In addition to confirming the importance of ensuring appropriate levels of active learning and academic challenge, this research has emphasised the importance of examining students' integration into institutional life and involvement in educationally relevant, 'beyond classroom' experiences.

The AUSSE measures student engagement through administration of the Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ) to a representative sample of first- and later-year bachelor degree students at each institution. The SEQ measures six facets of student engagement: Academic Challenge (AC), Active Learning (AL), Student and Staff Interactions (SSI), Enriching Educational Experiences (EEE), Supportive Learning Environment (SLE), and Work Integrated Learning (WIL). The SEQ is the most thoroughly validated survey instrument in use in Australian higher education, and has been revised for use in Australasian higher education.

The AUSSE has close methodological links with the USA's NSSE. To facilitate cross-national benchmarking, work has been done to align the instrument, population, sampling, analysis and reporting characteristics of AUSSE and NSSE. There are close ties between the SEQ items and those used in the College Student Report, NSSE's main instrument. This enables comparison to be made across these collections, with the exception of the WIL scale which is unique to AUSSE.

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### Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE)

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