

Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme

Tertiary Tuition and beyond: Transitioning with strengths and promoting opportunities

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The Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme-Tertiary Tuition (ITAS-TT) has provided Australian government funding for one-to-one and group tutorial study support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending Australian universities since 1989. It has been a central plank supporting Indigenous university students in their studies. However, evaluation of the scheme has identified quality limitations, under-utilisation, administrative burdens, and eligibility issues, and criticised the deficit or low academic expectations assumptions inherent in the scheme. In the 2016-2017 Budget the Australian government modified ITAS into an Indigenous Student Success Program. Reporting on research undertaken at a time of impending changes to funding arrangements and the continuation of ITAS, this paper builds on recent research into the transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders into higher education. The paper investigates the scheme through the perspectives of ITAS tutors and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students receiving ITAS tutoring in two regional universities in New South Wales. Qualitative research found that ITAS tutoring has enabled many students to manage their transition through university and complete their studies. Students and tutors identified limitations in the scheme in terms of guidelines, institutional expectations, access to learning management systems, and the timing of support. The study outcomes suggest that ITAS provides valuable support but has become static, and is not keeping up with developments in online learning and administration.

Keywords: Indigenous students, ITAS, Indigenous Advancement Strategy, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

Introduction

We were driven to begin this research project by impending changes to the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme-Tertiary Tuition (ITAS-TT). Comments from students and staff in research undertaken in 2012 with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics and students at 26 universities attested to the value of the tuition scheme in enabling many students to continue, engage with and achieve in higher education (Kinnane,

Wilks, Wilson, Hughes, & Thomas, 2014). However, the same research found some aspects of the administration and implementation of ITAS to be cumbersome. Further, it found the scheme is less successful for students studying in remote locations and in regional centres as there are often fewer potential tutors who meet the ITAS requirements, and those who do fit the criteria rarely have time to tutor all students requiring tutoring.

Following the election of the conservative Liberal-National Coalition Government in September 2013,

Indigenous Affairs became part of the portfolio of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. A review of all Indigenous funding followed, and the realignment of funding under a new Indigenous Advancement Strategy replaced more than 150 individual programs and activities with five broad programs (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014). This extended to ITAS funding in 2014. Concerns arose in the higher education sector that a proposed change from funding allocations based on student numbers to universities bidding for funding on a competitive basis would mean that universities with fewer Indigenous students could miss out on funding altogether (Liddle, 2014). Although existing funding arrangements continued into 2015 and 2016, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs foreshadowed changes to future funding and support (Scullion, 2014).

While this paper is unlikely to bring about changes itself, we hope it is timely, given the scheme is in a transition period, and that it will contribute to knowledge and understanding of the benefits and strengths of ITAS, and of identified areas for improvement, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students, particularly in relation to regional universities. The paper discusses the outcomes of a research project that investigated the views and experiences of students, tutors and other university personnel in relation to the operation and the role of ITAS in two regional New South Wales universities. Through the participants' insights, this paper identifies the significance of the scheme in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students at different stages of their study. We argue that ITAS continues to have merit and strengths for students and tutors, and needs to persist, building on its strengths and success, and widening participation.

Background

The Australian Department of Education introduced the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme in 1989 as a strategic initiative that emerged from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (Whatman, McLaughlin, Willstead, Tyhuis, & Beetsen, 2008). It was later renamed the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS). Through successive departmental and political changes, the Australian government has continued to fund ITAS through the *Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000*. Initially, measuring success and eligibility for funding was based on numbers of student completions and graduates linked to ITAS usage. However, this did not measure the quality of ITAS; many Indigenous

students do not need or use ITAS tutoring, and student success depends on multiple factors (Whatman *et al.*, 2008). At the Queensland University of Technology, Indigenous students had high rates of completion and participation, yet only 25 per cent used ITAS. Changed requirements in 2004 included reporting to government ITAS student results, different tutoring methods and student attendance, although subsequent government feedback to universities was not useful for improving the quality of the program (Whatman *et al.*, 2008).

Into 2015, ITAS provided two hours of individual or group tutoring per week per subject for undergraduate students plus five supplemental hours for exam preparation for eligible students. Limited tutoring is available for postgraduate students (Trudgett, 2010) or students undertaking bridging or preparatory courses. ITAS is administered through Indigenous Education Units or Indigenous student support services at individual universities, providing valuable assistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students at university (Patton, Lee Hong, Lampert, Burnett, & Anderson, 2012). However, the administration and management varies from one institution to the next. Some universities have adapted or added to ITAS in order to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students better, and to streamline administration (Whatman *et al.*, 2013).

In 2013, Kinnane *et al.* (2014) found that ITAS was recognised as a key enabler of student performance and was a reliable and central means of engaging students successfully, despite its administrative and implementation limitations and inflexibility. Further, ITAS often takes effect too late when students have already left university after early negative experiences. In a critique of ITAS, Whatman *et al.* (2008) focused on processes at QUT and student outcomes, questioning its deficit model as an explanation of student success or otherwise. The authors emphasised the need for further research and analysis of the uptake of ITAS, and the use of broader indicators such as students' understandings of success. Significantly, the study identified the value of the ITAS scheme in building cultural awareness and understandings of Indigenous perspectives, and enhancing pedagogy among ITAS tutors.

The underpinning deficit model, the need for greater awareness of Indigenous perspectives, and the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and pedagogies are echoed in a critique of Indigenous academic skills support at tertiary level by Nakata, Nakata and Chin (2008). They called for more research and understanding of the strategies that successful Indigenous tertiary students develop.

With its individual and group student focus, ITAS has the potential to contribute to this knowledge, but cultural awareness and training for tutors is needed to deepen their understanding and facilitate communication with students (Brady, 2012).

Other research has identified several practices and issues associated with the current operation of ITAS such as under-utilisation by students; the scheme's unavailability to students completing bridging courses and literacy and numeracy programs; onerous reporting requirements; and inadequate pay for tutors (Brady, 2012; Holt, 2011; Trudgett, 2010). Universities reported that ITAS inhibits flexibility and innovation (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012). In 2012, the Indigenous Higher Education Review signalled that the scheme was in need of review and re-design, as per Recommendation 13 of its final report (Behrendt *et al.*, 2012):

Recommendation 13

That the Australian Government reform funding for supplementary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support programs, including the Indigenous Support Program and the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme – Tertiary Tuition (ITAS–TT), in time for the 2013 academic year, based on the following design principles:

- Allow universities greater flexibility to provide locally relevant, tailored support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff.
- Target available funding to achieve an improvement in current enrolment levels but also with a greater emphasis on retention and completion rates.
- Ensure that funding would be simple to administer.
- Ensure that funding would support clear outcome-focussed accountability for universities.

The new funding model should include consideration of tutoring support for students who were previously ineligible for ITAS–TT assistance (p. 78).

The Australian Government appears to have adopted the terminology used in the review of ITAS funding by Behrendt *et al.* (2012), and the revision to all Indigenous program funding and reformatting ITAS into an Indigenous Advancement Strategy (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014). Following media reports that ITAS was to be disbanded (Hare, 2014), the Minister for Indigenous Affairs countered that this was 'scaremongering' by the opposition Australian Labor Party,

and that the scheme would in fact be improved through more 'holistic/tailored student support activities...more flexible with a reduced administrative burden' (Scullion, 2014). This was implemented in the 2016/2017 Budget by combining three existing programs, the Commonwealth Scholarship Program, the Indigenous Support Program and the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme – Tertiary Tuition, into one program to 'improve progression and completion rates for Indigenous higher education students' (Australian Government, 2016). From 2017, the Indigenous Student Success Program will continue to offer tutorial assistance, with an expectation of student monitoring and progress evaluation.

The research project

This research responded to Recommendation 13 of the Indigenous Higher Education Review (Behrendt *et al.*, 2012) and its call for significant reform of the operation of ITAS-TT in the Australian university sector. Further, a key finding of related Office for Learning and Teaching funded project 'Can't Be What You Can't See': The Transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students into Higher Education (Kinnane *et al.*, 2014) was that university personnel working in Indigenous student support capacities, whilst stressing the value of the scheme, strongly articulated the need for changes to ITAS-TT. New directions in the scheme, informed by evidence-based research, were needed in relation to improving ITAS in terms of efficacy regarding its enunciated outcomes, and its complex and at times restrictive funding arrangements.

The research aimed to contribute to the higher education sector's understanding and knowledge about the level of success and suitability of ITAS from the point of view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in regional areas, as well as ITAS tutors and Indigenous Education Unit staff in the institutions the students attended. A further motivation for the research was to inform the debate and discussion about Indigenous higher education funding generated by the Australian Coalition government's impending but unclear changes to ITAS funding and operational aspects of the scheme.

The research methodology respected and incorporated Australian approaches and methods for Indigenous research, and followed institutional ethical guidelines (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), 2012; National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007). An Indigenous research

assistant participated in interviews and focus discussion groups, contributing cultural acknowledgement and cultural safety for the participants. The research had the support and the endorsement of the Indigenous education centres at both universities. Ethics approval to undertake the research was obtained from both universities. Participants' identities and contributions were kept confidential throughout the research project and the data analysis.

The research investigated the views and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students receiving or who had received ITAS tutoring, ITAS tutors, and university personnel in relation to the operation of ITAS in two regional universities in New South Wales. Eighteen students, 15 tutors and four university personnel were interviewed during the period September 2014 to April 2015. We held one-to-one structured interviews at the two universities with ITAS coordinators, ITAS tutors, and managers of Indigenous Education Units, or similar. The interview questions focused on elaborating the perspectives and experiences of ITAS tutors, and the ITAS coordinators in relation to the operations of ITAS, and administrative, reporting and funding procedures (see Appendix A).

In the two universities, semi-structured focus group discussions and individual interviews were held with Indigenous students who were receiving tutoring under the ITAS scheme. The focus groups and interviews informed the research about the participants' individual experiences with ITAS tutoring and, through dialogue and narrative, reveal shared or varying perceptions. Focus discussion group methodology is preferred for Indigenous students because it relates to Indigenous practices and customs of sharing, consultation and collaboration (Stewart, 2007). Questions for students sought their views on the benefits and operation of ITAS, as well as suggestions for improvements (see Appendix A). Focus groups and interviews took place in open, common spaces in the Indigenous education centres in both universities.

Initial contact was made with the directors of the Indigenous education centres who in turn invited ITAS Coordinators, ITAS tutors and Indigenous centre personnel to participate in the research. Staff at both centres sent an introductory message to students receiving ITAS tutoring via the universities' student email addresses, including the researcher's email address should they wish to participate in the research. We followed up with students by email and in person through the Indigenous education centres to arrange interviews and discussions. The undergraduate students' ages ranged from 18 to mature aged. According to

the guidelines at the time, ITAS tutoring for postgraduate students was very limited.

Student experiences

The vast majority of students had positive views to share about their ITAS experiences. For many students, the tutoring had enabled them to stick with university:

It helped me so much and I wouldn't still be at university without it. (Student)

It's a big relief knowing that it was there I would have dropped out without it. (Student)

Without ITAS I wouldn't have got across the river; not even scraped through; I now understand what empowerment is. (Student)

Other students articulated the value of ITAS for them in terms of academic skills, subject support and mental health support:

Having a tutor helps to alleviate anxieties. (Student)

You have a support person. (Student)

I wouldn't be here without ITAS, it is really good, especially the support after hours, the encouragement. My tutors have challenged me in a good way. They help me to see things I wouldn't see, they help me to be more positive and not so hard on myself. They are also really good with referencing and other academic skills. (Student)

Having a tutor helps me to understand the language that the university uses, and having someone knowledgeable about the ways of learning/writing/academic style etc. Having a tutor helps me to tune into that. It's about getting feedback, how do I improve? (Student)

I would not have passed maths without [my] tutor. Wasn't focused on maths before I had a tutor and really struggled. I can see myself getting smarter. [The tutor has] taught structure and kept me motivated and stopped me from feeling guilty about not doing work. Great support in areas I struggle in. Keep[s] you focused. A very good place and helps to overcome disadvantage. (Student)

Thus, the students conveyed a strong message that without the assistance (both academic and pastoral) of their tutors provided through ITAS they may not have kept going with their university studies.

The tutors broke down barriers for students in their progress through university studies. In most cases, tutors and tutoring spaces provided a haven in the university, especially in the initial stages of the students' degrees. For students, the tutors 'say things in a way that I understand', and assist students to 'decipher' aspects of university-

speak such as marker feedback. One student stated that 'my tutor explains things to me better'. Many Indigenous students are shy and reluctant to speak with lecturers and course tutors, feeling they need to build relationships before they are comfortable in seeking help from the teaching staff. As a result, unnecessary misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the requirements of assessments can persist.

The importance of a 'place'

Both universities have provided welcoming spaces for students to study individually, to meet with other students, to meet with their tutors, or just to hang out. It was clear from the students' responses that this was

their 'place' on campus. They regarded the atmosphere as warm and inviting. Many students commented on how great these spaces were and we saw students receiving tutoring in the

areas provided. Staff in the Indigenous Education Units at both universities were located close to the student spaces, were visible to students and easy to access. This factor appeared to be of huge benefit. The spaces, and the sense of belonging and community created by, in, and through them was instrumental in the students' perceptions of their success at university.

The students loved being in these places, as expressed in the following comments:

It has good rooms available and using the centre makes things much easier. (Student)

Sometimes I just need a hug and (this) is a place I can get one. (Student)

[The centre] is so good at supporting our participation in all aspects of university life. They go above and beyond. (Student)

However, at one university campus, students were unhappy with the designated tutoring space, finding it 'noisy, cold and uninviting'.

The students viewed the availability of food, snacks and refreshments in the centres combined with all-hours access as a very positive affordance. By providing students with a place where they feel safe and comfortable to learn and can connect with other Indigenous students, ITAS becomes more beneficial to them. One tutor described the centre as 'a safe and quiet place to work' for students.

ITAS tutors

The tutors interviewed regarded the scheme as an opportunity to bridge a gap that exists in terms of Indigenous success in higher education, reflecting previous research findings about ITAS (Kinnane *et al.*, 2014; Behrendt *et al.*, 2012; Whatman *et al.*, 2008). The tutors, many non-Indigenous, viewed ITAS as breaking down barriers for all involved, increasing and refining the students' academic skills and confidence and their belief in themselves:

Creating a space for students to feel safe and comfortable to ask questions. (Tutor)

There's a cultural thing in their classes of not wanting to put themselves forward. (Tutor)

Tutoring helps them to build their confidence in their own work, and it gives them the affirmation they need that they are on the right track. (Tutor)

The biggest obstacle is self-confidence. My student knows the stuff but she

didn't think she did. The tutoring has built up her confidence. (Tutor)

Important especially to help them identify their strengths, it's not all about their weaknesses, ITAS builds reaffirmation. (Tutor)

To raise the standard early, they need more than just Passes in the early years of their degree if they want a high GPA, they need at least Cs in Year 1, and Ds and HDs in subsequent years. (Tutor)

Success is about owning the knowledge that you can succeed and do well [but I am] very honest with students about the effort required to do a university degree. (Tutor)

The tutors' comments indicate that through working closely with the students they had gained a deeper understanding and connection to Indigenous Australia, and a deeper understanding of family and community commitments in the students' lives. This finding mirrors that of Whatman *et al.* (2008) who identified the value of ITAS in building cultural awareness and understandings of Indigenous perspectives, and enhancing pedagogy among ITAS tutors.

Induction, training and payment

However, tutors were critical of some administrative aspects of ITAS. Some related that they did not receive

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sufficient induction to the university nor to the ITAS program (some are from outside the university). The tutors expressed the view that they would appreciate receiving cultural awareness training, stressing that cultural knowledge needs to be refreshed regularly. In addition, they would like training and updating in using the university online learning management systems. Many tutors mentioned they would appreciate more social get-togethers where tutors, university support staff and students could socialise and get to know each other better, a beneficial outcome for all involved. Some students also suggested similar improvement to the scheme, for example, a camping trip.

At one university, tutors made it clear that the processes used to pay them and the attendant paperwork could be improved and streamlined. Currently at this university tutors are paid by completing a paper pay claim form that students have to sign to confirm the claim of the hours worked. Many tutors labelled this process tedious as they had to rely on students to sign off on time during the tutorials to ensure they were paid. This process is also problematic because if students don't turn up to scheduled tutoring sessions the tutors do not get paid. Students too described this process as a little uncomfortable and awkward, and wondered whether it might be more appropriate if the paperwork was to be done in another way. Tutors at this university also observed the pay scale was considerably less than for the same work at other universities at which they tutor, with one reflecting, 'it's a sense of feeling less worthy because of the low rates; there should be national equity, I get a lot more (per hour) at other universities'. The low pay for ITAS tutors was noted in the review by Behrendt *et al.* (2012).

Relationships and understandings

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that most student/tutor relationships were based on a type of negotiation, partly in response to 'the vagueness of guidelines in relation to how we actually do our tutoring' (mostly a negative), but also arising out of the flexibility of tutoring arrangements (mostly a positive). Students and tutors alike commented on these aspects; one student related that 'there is very little information about what is expected of me/my tutor, for example, how do I know if one of us is not doing the right thing?' In reference to the vagueness of the scheme's guidelines, a tutor remarked: 'ITAS works based on student/tutor relationships; (they) need to be good and effective. It's a funny feeling ... I feel

like I'm not connected to anything - the student and I meet, and that's kind of it'.

However, these negotiated relationships are in the main, genuine and robust and demonstrate a level of connection and mutual respect. One tutor commented that her students related to her own Indigenous background and her academic successes provided a role model. But she also stressed that she is very honest with students about the effort required to do a university degree and the commitment required on the students' part:

Sometimes students themselves don't value the scheme/us enough - this is a weakness in the valuing of the process, it's not the students' money, and they can take it for granted; a lack of respect for the scheme (not showing up; being late; cancelling; going surfing instead) - it's not a cultural thing, it's a generational thing. All the onus is on the tutor and not the student, we can 'dob' them in if they don't show up three times in a row and then they lose their tutor, but I don't. Some students really believe that I'm going to do their work for them! I don't of course because if I do, they will never own what they need to know. (Tutor)

Tutor/student relationships often go beyond academic skills building. A student related 'the tutors are amazing, they give us much more time than they are being paid for'. One tutor interviewed was helping a student write a scholarship application in the tutor's own time during the university holiday period.

Delivery modes

Tutors and students alike noted the flexibility of delivering ITAS as an outstanding strength. We heard examples of tutors and students meeting at each other's homes, sharing food, and meeting at cafes, in groups, frequently emailing to keep in touch and occasionally Skyping. Students related that this multi-layered and convivial approach to tutoring aligned well for them within the context of an Aboriginal way of being and a collective approach to learning. Given that many universities deliver a large percentage of their courses online, it is tempting to envisage that ITAS tutoring might move more into online mode accordingly. However, the tutors and students we interviewed stressed that a key strength of ITAS is that in the main tutoring is face-to-face. As one tutor observed 'it's a cultural thing, a human thing', and an Indigenous education centre administrator remarked: 'relationships are so important; we need to get people who work effectively with Indigenous students'.

A tutor who was also a third-year student observed that it's 'good to be able to negotiate meeting times, can work

around when we're both available', and another, 'I tutor the student at her house as she has her computer set up there. We correspond by Skype and email in between the face to face tutoring sessions if she has questions, and she finds that helpful'.

Access to university learning management systems

At both universities, tutors related it was a struggle, indeed in most cases not possible, to make connections within the university's online learning management systems to help them to become more efficient in supporting the students they tutor. One tutor observed: 'If I had access [I] would be able to show the student around [the learning management site], where things are located, to help them feel more comfortable with the resources'.

Not having access to the learning sites meant that they were not able to access course instructions and resources, nor assessment details. Tutors were therefore reliant on students for these materials and often valuable time was wasted chasing them up. Providing ITAS tutors with direct access to the learning sites would ensure that the tutors could work to their best ability to support students more efficiently, and they could also keep up to date in changes in course content. One tutor related how helpful it would be if tutors could borrow textbooks on extended loan from the library: 'textbooks are very expensive and there are always new editions, and are only available on short term loan'. A student suggested it could be useful for ITAS tutors to access the online tutor links (hidden to students) within the learning management systems. In this way, the ITAS tutors could be party to the general exchanges between tutors regarding resources, teaching ideas and overall student progress during the delivery of the unit of work.

Students and tutors alike highlighted the absence of collaboration between ITAS tutors and the mainstream course teaching staff, observing this had the potential to exert a negative impact on the quality and efficiency of tutoring provided. This was an opinion frequently expressed, and it is reflected in the following student's comments: 'It would be good if there was more communication between the tutors and the UAs [Unit Assessors], they could see when assessments are due. I have to write all these things down for my (ITAS) tutor'.

However, on a cautionary note, if ITAS tutor access to the learning management sites resulted in inadvertent identification of the student, and this was not the student's wish, further thinking may be needed. Additionally, unit

coordinators may feel uncomfortable about 'outside' persons (ITAS tutors) having unfettered access to the unit material. Again, more consideration of this proposal may be required in this respect.

Widening participation and access

In terms of availability and ease of access to ITAS in 2015, students in pathways and bridging courses generally are not eligible. Some respondents made a strong case for the extension of ITAS into such courses, with one tutor commenting from personal experiences in this respect:

It would be great to see ITAS available for [title deleted] – the university's pathways program. [This program] was for me a steep learning curve, and is especially so for people who have been out of school for a while. It gives them a very solid grounding for coping with Year 1. It builds an important level of confidence. Confidence is a big issue for Indigenous students, to know that university is not out of their reach; it gets university as a feasible option in their minds early. (Tutor)

On the other hand, postgraduate students were entitled only to a reduced amount of tutoring based on an assessment as to how 'different' their postgraduate course is from their undergraduate course. This also seems counterproductive, considering the demanding nature of their studies, especially if the students have had consistent tutoring throughout the duration of their undergraduate studies. That ITAS is currently not generally available to postgraduate students was viewed as a significant limitation and a resounding negative at both universities, and was reflected in the Behrendt review (2012).

Most tutors contended that two hours per unit per week isn't enough to cover all the material effectively, requiring coverage each teaching session. This is especially the case around assessment time or if the tutoring starts a few weeks after the teaching session has begun, which is frequently the case, leaving several topics to catch up on. It was felt there was insufficient flexibility in the scheme for students who have used their two hours and genuinely need more.

One tutor suggested allowing for a few more hours per week:

...optimally 3 – 4 hours per week per unit ... you don't have to claim for it if you don't use it, it would just be good to have the flexibility for more if needed. (Tutor)

Another commented:

...students shouldn't have to apply for extra hours. Would be good if tutors could make recommendations/assessments on higher needs students. (Tutor)

And another:

...often students don't realise that they need ITAS until half way through semester... if they need thirty hours at that point, they should get it. (Tutor)

Timing

From the perspective of many students there is considerable room for improvement in terms of timeliness and availability of the scheme. Students expressed a need to be matched with a tutor as soon as possible in the teaching session, and a number mentioned that they had not started with the tutoring until well into the session, for example, 'It was a bit late; I'd already done some assessments'. Other students weren't aware the scheme existed for the first part of their time at university: 'I didn't find out about it until my second year'. Ensuring students are made aware of ITAS at class registration or during the official orientation period would enable them to have the greatest chance of being effectively supported at university from the time of their commencement.

There was also concern expressed amongst tutors with the timeframe in which they receive their contracts, with some stating they often 'start off behind the eight-ball due to not receiving contracts until Week 4 of the teaching period: 'It takes two weeks to get my contracts done, can be half way through session by then, and then there's a lot of pressure on the tutors too, not just the students, when they have lots to do'. As one tutor put it, the lag time in contracting tutors:

...can be too late for students who are already struggling with their first assignment. By Week 4 there is quite a lot to catch up on. It would be much better if we could get an early jump on it, it's important for them [students] to get familiar early with everything else they have to do in Year 1. (Tutor)

Again this might be avoided by promoting ITAS more broadly to students prior to the commencement of their studies in any study period so that the student/tutor matching can be done as early as possible enabling the tutoring to get underway promptly in the teaching session. Universities are well known for sending many emails to students (ask the nearest student!), and students can be overwhelmed by the email volume. Students, especially in the early days of their degrees, experience a lot of 'noise' about all the things going on. Because of this noise, they may disregard the emails - as important as they are - about ITAS support and the general support provided to them by their university's Indigenous unit.

In an effort to address the kaleidoscope of information that comes at students, one university in this research has recently inserted a sentence near the 'tick-a-box' relating to Australian Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander self-identification on the enrolment form. The purpose of this extra sentence is to let students know their university has an Indigenous support centre, and asks the students if they would like to know more about its activities.

Looking forward

Tutors and students shared insights into improvements to the operation of ITAS, or the design of its successor(s):

I would like to see greater guidance with respect to the best outcomes for tutors and students, outcomes which you would expect to be mutually beneficial. (Tutor)

There is not enough voice in ITAS for students or tutors. This is the first time I've ever been asked for my views about ITAS and I've been tutoring for three years. (Tutor)

Testimonies from previous students could be put up around the Indigenous Education Unit to impart to new students to encourage them to utilise ITAS. (Tutor)

We need an integrated online system for all the paperwork, we use online systems in everything else at university why not ITAS? Tutors are sometimes discouraged as they are not paid until the students sign the paperwork and this can take a while and a lot of chasing up. An email from the student saying they have attended the session could proxy as a signature. (Tutor)

Multi-level styles of tutoring, i.e. instead of just one on one, have a multi-level approach to how people learn; we learn in groups; by discussion; Aboriginal people are a collective system, it's what we do. (Student)

Making the program more widely known, letting them know it's a good thing to do, do it, and feel good about it, and to not feel that it's a sign of weakness to use ITAS and other things such as academic skills programs. (Tutor)

I was doubtful about my tutor's qualifications, wasn't sure how qualified they were, and started disengaging from her. I found her to be negative, therefore this is one of the weaknesses, it would be good to have reassurance about who they are, what their qualifications are etc. More transparency. (Student)

ITAS should target high achieving students in the latter years of a course as potential tutors, collaborations between lecturers etc., ITAS should ask lecturers to nominate students who would make good tutors. An

improved ITAS could work to hook students back onto campus. (Student).

What does success look like?

One question we asked tutors was what success looks like in the context of ITAS:

If we get a student/tutor match that works, and the relationship becomes good, a lot of success can come from this – unit of work completion and degree completion are the ultimate measures of success.

If you take ITAS away, Indigenous completion rates will go down and we will go backwards; for all the good jobs you have to have a degree.

ITAS tutoring helps students to stay on scholarships, and if they can keep their scholarship they're more likely to stay at university. If not, they would have to go home and study from there, and their chances of completion would not be as good.

Finally, one tutor summed up the sentiments of many:

Tomorrow I'm attending the graduation of an Aboriginal woman who had many difficulties facing her – that's success!

Conclusion

Evidence from this research shows that at both regional universities in which the study was conducted, ITAS has been a vital means of assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to achieve their academic goals. The scheme's operation was viewed by students and tutors alike as extremely beneficial and a very positive influence on the students' experiences of university. Partnering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students with a tutor throughout their undergraduate studies (and in some cases, their postgraduate studies) is assisting students to negotiate the visible and invisible hurdles encountered during their journey through university studies. However, we also found that from an administrative and efficiency perspective some improvements could be implemented.

ITAS has been invaluable for Indigenous students who feel overwhelmed by the university machine and culture, or lacking in confidence. It has provided a bridge and strengthened their university journey. This research demonstrates the ongoing value of ITAS, and we hope recently introduced changes to the scheme and future arrangements will address shortcomings whilst maintaining strengths.

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Judith Wilks is a Senior Lecturer in Education at Southern Cross University and an experienced educator with a significant research, teaching and community engagement track record in regional education services delivery, and increasingly specialist research skills in the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and success in higher education.

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Katie Wilson's (Te Atiawa) research areas are Indigenous students' school education and their transition to higher education, and post-qualitative methodologies.

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Appendix A: Questions for participants

Questions for ITAS Tutors and Indigenous Education Unit management personnel:

1. In your view, what are the strengths of the ITAS scheme?
2. How would you define success in the ITAS scheme?
3. How do you feel about the administration and funding arrangements of the scheme?
4. Do you have any comments you would like to make concerning the availability of ITAS in terms of eligibility guidelines (e.g. students undertaking bridging courses including literacy and numeracy programs, and also postgraduate students?)
5. What are your views on the availability and timeliness of tutoring arrangements for students throughout their study at uni?
6. What are your views on things such as the flexibility and scope of the scheme overall?
7. What do you feel are specific issues strengths/weaknesses of the scheme for a) students, b) tutors, and c) administrators of the ITAS scheme?
8. What things could be done to strengthen the future operation of ITAS?

Questions for students receiving ITAS tutoring:

1. In what ways has having an ITAS tutor been beneficial to your study?
2. What are your views on the availability and getting access to ITAS tutoring at times that are suitable for students?
3. In your view does the ITAS scheme have any particular strengths or weaknesses?
4. Can you suggest changes to the scheme that you think would be beneficial to students?