



NCSEHE panel discussion: Strategies for supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of students of colour and First Nations students

Extended Q and A with Daphne C. Watkins, Bep Uink and James Smith

Q — How can we educate ALL staff members to be anti-racist every day, especially those in close relationships with First Nations students?

JS — Really difficult to answer this question. We need open discussions about white privilege and white supremacy. We also need appropriate structures and whole-of-university approaches that demand anti-racist approaches. This includes explicit teaching about racism (in all its forms) in all tertiary courses/curricula.

BU— I also think it is a really tough gig in trying to get all staff members to be anti-racist. Unfortunately, there are members our society who hold implicit assumptions about race and culture and they are not open to changing their minds. But, it is really hard for a racist person to survive in an anti-racist institution. Fortunately, I find most staff WANT to talk more openly about race and racism. The thing I find myself most often telling colleagues who ask me this question is to question (in a non-confrontational way) assumptions that are underlying staff's actions. A very core assumption could be underlying their actions and interactions with Indigenous students, and this assumption may require updating.

Q — For Dr Watkins — are you connected with the work of My Brothers' Keeper at the Obama Foundation?

DW — Yes! I know the MBK people well and work with them.

Q — In Australia, the students most likely to consider departing their higher education course early are: from low SES backgrounds, those with reported disability and Indigenous learners. Do you feel the way that higher education feedback is disseminated needs to change (e.g. from text-only to text-based feedback supplemented by audio-visual) to better support these learners in particular?

JS — Good pedagogy is about providing different tools and resources to support learners. Consideration of alternative forms of assessment and feedback are therefore critical considerations. We also need to pay greater attention to decolonising and Indigenous pedagogies (i.e. narrative approaches; storytelling; yarning, etc.) to increase the cultural competence of universities. A new book recently published by Springer is a great resource in this regard: <https://www.springer.com/gp/book/9789811553615>

Q — At what age would you recommend to begin educating and creating awareness of such challenges that children of diverse backgrounds face with migration and or new communities?

JS — As early as possible... but the way this is conveyed needs to be aligned with cognitive and social stages of development. There are some resources that have been disseminated over the past few months with respect to talking about racism that are particularly good. The broader topic of social inequities is something that we should be talking about openly with children of all ages.

Q — Would it be possible to apply the YBMen project to other young men?

JS — Absolutely! The three panelists (and others) are already investigating funding opportunities to adapt YBMen to young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males. It is important to consider the nuances relating to age, gender and culture when adapting such resources. It would be great for NCSEHE to invest in this space.

Q — James, you mention calling out racism in the interest of our students — which in my experience is mostly covert. How can we do that safely?

JS — Really difficult to answer this question. We need open discussions about white privilege and white supremacy to start with. We need also need to think about cultural competence seriously through the explicit structures and whole-of-university approaches that demand anti-racist approaches. Making university a safer space culturally is really important (and this includes employing more staff from racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds). Another strategy is explicitly teaching about racism (in all its forms) in all tertiary courses/curricula. The covert nature of racism can really only be addressed if we start addressing this. Some health services are doing a good job in providing professional development opportunities for staff to learn about racial bias and profiling (from which the higher education sector could learn from). See for example: <https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/ask-specialist-larrakia-tiwi-yolngu-stories-to-inspire/id1516150200>

Q — What is the most important enabler that has been identified by Indigenous students to continue successfully with their studies at this time?

BU — Being able to maintain supportive relationships, whether this be with university staff or with family and community members. It is through these relationships that students can actively problem solve more pragmatic issues, such as not having access to technology to participate in online learning.

Q — What strategies have you implemented to promote and ensure cultural safety within your institutions/organisations?

BU — At Murdoch, we run Cultural Awareness training for all staff members and students. This is a half-day workshop where attendees are prompted to consider their assumptions around Indigenous culture and reflect on their own privilege and unconscious bias. Kulbardi staff also try to actively engage faculty and university governance in cultural safety initiatives. When we have discussions with faculty members about a student this is often an opportunity to educate individual staff members on the context of Indigenous student education.

Uink, B., Hill, B., Day, A., & Martin, G. (2019). 'Wings to Fly': A Case Study of Supporting Indigenous Student Success through a Whole-of-University Approach—ERRATUM. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 48(2), 206-206, outlines our approach to engaging university governance in cultural safety initiatives.

Q — How do we tackle the issue of the further burden of labour on POC staff in supporting students of colour?

BU — This is a really important question and one that all non-Indigenous and non-POC staff should always be asking and particularly in times where Indigenous and POC are being mentioned in the media (e.g., during Black Lives Matter, Raise the Age campaign). Staff members can reflect on the following questions:

How might the topics I am hearing in the media be impacting Indigenous colleagues?

Can I reach out to Indigenous colleagues to check in with how they are being impacted? Indigenous responses to social issues are as diverse as the individuals who make up Indigenous communities.

How can I work *with* Indigenous colleagues on this issue? What role/work will I do and what work do I expect my colleagues to do? Would I be okay with the burden of work I am placing on an Indigenous colleague? I think the key here is to listen to the input of Indigenous colleagues but not assume that person has the capacity to then take on the actual work of formulating a response, and you may end up being the person to carry the bulk of the work in formulating the response. Am I prepared to do this work? What skills can I bring to the task?

Following Indigenous leaders and POC on social media helps take the burden off your Indigenous colleagues, as these people are often posting and tweeting really poignant questions and reflections for non- Indigenous people.

One helpful initiative in my institution which came out of COVID-19 was the idea of an ‘equity pause’ in all decision making. Indigenous (and other equity groups) often get overlooked in times of crisis and so senior decision makers are reminded to take a pause in their decision making to consider how their decisions might impact equity groups. Having this ‘pause’ built into formal decision making structures shifts the burden of raising equity issues away from the members of the equity groups.

Q — How can we help white people better understand white privilege and its damages?

BU — Again, a really important question without a simple answer. Consistent with James’s suggestion that students need to be taught about racism, they equally need to be taught about race and privilege. Staff and students need to be given a space to explore their own privileges and how that may impact their thinking and actions. An activity (which I was given by a colleague) which I use in teaching health students about working with Indigenous patients is to ask students to write down what is a distinguishing feature of their culture, what aspects of their culture they are proud about, and to name a famous person who represents their culture. Students from “white” cultures often struggle to answer these questions which then highlights to them that they are embedded within the dominant culture — it is really difficult to name aspects of something which you don’t have to regularly reflect on because it is just the status quo.

Q — How can we advocate for and champion intersectional approaches to strategy, policy, and practices in university student support?

BU — Similar to having an ‘equity pause’, I think an ‘intersectional pause’ would help. Pausing to ask, ‘How will the decisions we are making affect students from multiple equity groups?’ We can keep bringing up the fact that students can belong to multiple social categories and which compound their disadvantage. At Kulbardi we champion the inclusion of Indigenous LGBTQA+ students by displaying pride flags and LGBTQA+ friendly messaging. Our research (as does research from Menzies) also looks at Indigenous student success through a gendered lens to better understand students’ experiences as both Indigenous and female.

Q — What can universities do to address structural and interpersonal racism experienced by their students and staff?

BU — Talk about structural racism and acknowledge its existence. There is nothing more invalidating than people acting as if racism is a thing of the past. The COVID-19 pandemic

really served as a litmus test for institutions to assess how far they had gone in Indigenising their institution — were Indigenous concerns even raised in university responses? If not, this is probably a good sign that there is some work to be done.

Derald Wing Sue's paper on Bystanders and Allies is a good primer on this topic. He talks about moving from a bystander to an ally, who is actively anti-racist and outlines the types of covert racism to which POC are exposed. Sue's paper also provides a list of strategies for responding to covert racism, which is often interpersonal.

Sue, D. W., Alsaidi, S., Awad, M. N., Glaeser, E., Calle, C. Z., & Mendez, N. (2019). Disarming racial microaggressions: Microintervention strategies for targets, White allies, and bystanders. *American Psychologist*, 74(1), 128.

Q — What key strategies can supervisors and university staff use to enhance respectful inclusion for Indigenous research candidates?

BU — Great question! The most successful and respectful supervision I have seen from a non-Indigenous supervisor has been when they give themselves equal status to the student in the supervisory relationship. Supervisor-student relationships are often hierarchical because the supervisor knows more than the student. But, when the research topic is Indigenous health or Indigenous methodologies, the student can be the expert (although not necessarily and they may wish to seek other Indigenous scholars' input). But, they are definitely the expert in Indigenous lived experience. The supervisor is an expert in academia and university processes — so the supervision becomes about two experts coming together to exchange ideas. I think this format ultimately extends respect to the student's lived experience as an Indigenous person.

When the research topic does not involve Indigenous content, I think the supervisor can still benefit from seeking the student's thoughts on the topic at hand and encouraging them to voice any differences they see between the current worldview and an Indigenous worldview. In any case, I believe respectful supervision occurs when the supervisor is committed to help launching the student's research career.