

Higher Education and First Nations Students: The Charles Darwin University Story

Northern Institute, People Policy Place seminar

Dr Tracy Woodroffe, Dr Kate Golebiowska, Dr Guzyal Hill and Ms Alicia Boyle

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Charles Darwin University acknowledges all First Nations people across the lands on which we live and work, and we pay our respects to Elders both past and present.



Our research team

Dr Tracy Woodroffe - Senior Lecturer, CDU

Dr Kate Golebiowska - Senior Research Fellow, CDU

Dr Guzyl Hill – Senior Lecturer, CDU

Mrs. Alicia Boyle – Research Fellow and PhD Candidate, CDU

Why this study?

- This project is the first investigation of the engagement of undergraduate First Nations students in Higher Education(HE) at CDU
- Appropriate and positive engagement of First Nations students in HE in regional settings is paramount to the completion of their studies
- The project will deliver mutually informed lessons for CDU staff and First Nations students

Aims

- Provide evidence of First Nations student experiences that contribute to their ability to undertake and complete their undergraduate studies at CDU
- Provide evidence to support ways to increase both lecturer and institutional cultural competency to support improved First Nations experiences with undergraduate studies at CDU
- Produce a 'good practice' guide to assist lecturers and the institution to support First Nations students to undertake and complete their undergraduate studies at CDU

Stage 2 of 3

STAGE 2 - 2023

FOCUS ON LECTURERS AND SUPPORT STAFF

- Complete interviews with lecturers and professional staff.
- Focus Groups – Casuarina and Sydney campuses
- Use of NVivo for coding and analysis.
- Collate Findings for output documents.
- Addition of 2022 data around enrolment and completion of undergraduate First Nations students to Findings.
- Begin drafts of the Student Guide and Staff Handbook
- Presentation to students and staff at CDU
- Acquittal of project funds
- Second-year HEPPP end-of-year report to secure 2024 funding

Qualitative data collection

- Interviews with CDU lecturers identified in the survey
- Interviews with professional staff including Indigenous academic support staff
- 2 focus groups with CDU lecturing and professional staff

Interviews with CDU Academic and Professional Staff

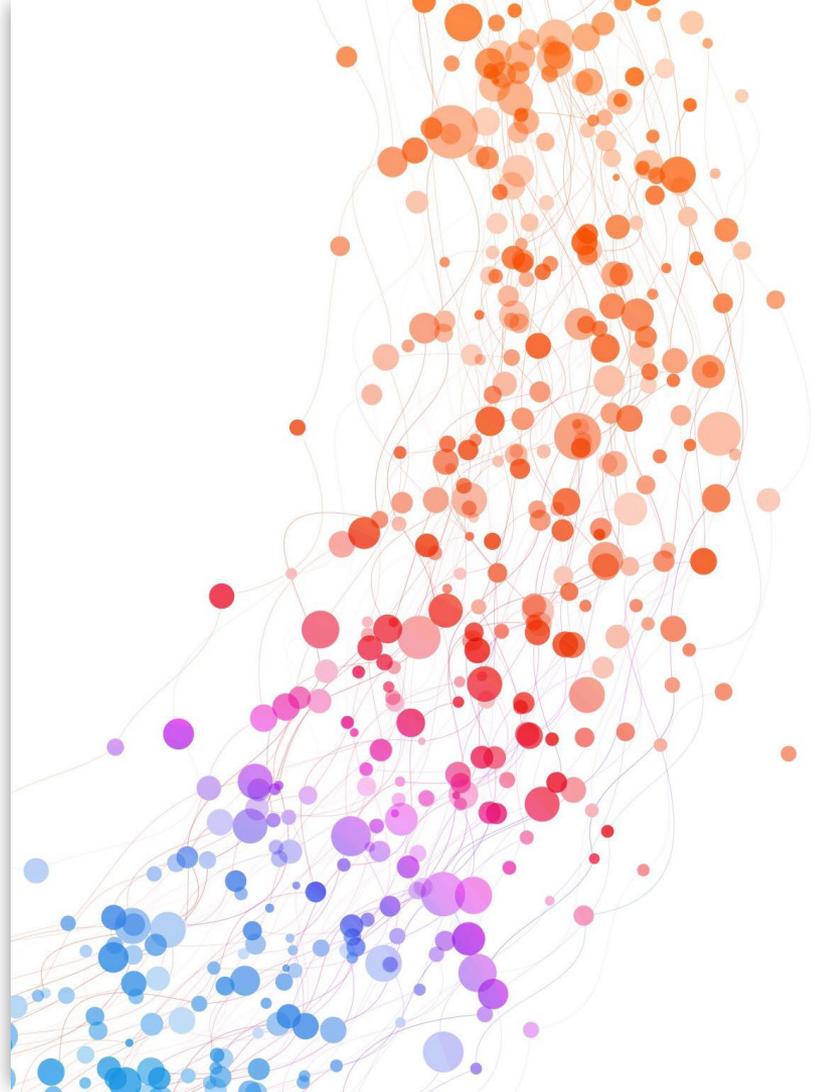
- Defining cultural competence
- Strategies used by CDU lecturers to effectively engage First Nations Undergraduate students to stay until completion
- Things that students need help with
- Experience of First Nations Undergraduate students at CDU – Teaching
 - CDU Lecture CONTENT demonstrating cultural competence
 - Culturally appropriate resources useful to effectively engage First Nations Undergraduate students
 - CDU DELIVERY strategies demonstrating cultural competence
- Experience of First Nations Undergraduate students at CDU - Pastoral care and support
 - Pastoral care and support best embracing, exhibiting, enacting cultural competence
- Tell tale signs of student success

Strategies used to effectively engage First Nations Undergraduate students to stay until completion

- One-on-one time with students to assist them to get organized, access scholarships, find information, and navigate individual paths
- Good interpersonal relationships built on trust, that encourage honest two-way conversations
- Understand the context of the individual, have respect and awareness of their circumstances
- Need to be understanding and compassionate
- Provide support, particularly in relation to assessment
- First Nations CDU and Menzies staff invited as guest lecturers
- Create environments where First Nation students feel comfortable sharing and expressing something

Strategies used to effectively engage First Nations Undergraduate students to stay until completion

- *'Drawing those boundaries between me and the external. Be careful. Be mindful. There are people in the class and other people online. When you're sharing something, reflect before you speak. So that's how I set classroom boundaries around race, racism.'*
- *'Use their questions Adjust practice and communication to incorporate modelling of tasks. Reward student efforts. Praise their risk-taking.'*



Things that students need help with

- Technological literacy is a challenge for first year First Nations students
- Learnline was repeatedly mentioned
- Finances
- Coping with study and work-life balances
- Submitting forms/information and assessments

Things that students need help with

‘There is a need for a central point for a student that they can then reach out from there for specific supports.’

‘Learnline, the data heaviness, the structure...it’s hard for everyone.’

For remote students...‘Learnline, is a massive hurdle...it can be the repository but all the other learning needs to happen on Zoom and by email communication.’

‘The two-factor authentication, makes things very difficult when peoples phone numbers are changing all the time and it effectively locks people out.’

Experience of First Nations Undergraduate students at CDU – Teaching

- Good unit design – content and delivery
- Consistent Learnline navigation
- Interactive Learnline sites
- Tutorials as interactive discussions about what students have learned and what they're not sure about

Experience of First Nations Undergraduate students at CDU – Teaching

‘A good lecturer, a good unit coordinator can entice every student to want to participate. If you get your questions right, and you've got the topic delivery, students are interested straight up. Do a lot of delivery design and make it a very interactive online space.’

‘We are using the same [Learnline] platform to keep it consistent so that way every time a student goes in, they should be able to navigate their way through, which I think is really important. It's beneficial for them all to be the same and it's going to help the students navigate that a lot easier.’

‘There is content online and sometimes it will refer to textbooks. I do try and use that mixture for different learners of written words. We embed a lot of videos to try and do that and then refer them, to read these pages of the textbook and do these questions.’

‘The tutorial that we talk about is reflective of the week. So, it's more about a discussion around what they've learned and what they're not sure about. We're now here to talk about, you know, the understandings and to try and apply them to real world situations.’

Experience of First Nations Undergraduate students at CDU – Teaching (cont.)

- Verbally acknowledge difference and embrace its value in the classroom
- Use different delivery styles to allow for greater engagement and deeper learning for all
- Consider different forms of assessment
- Be as accommodating as you can

Experience of First Nations Undergraduate students at CDU – Teaching

'In the classrooms I verbally acknowledge that we all come from different life experiences, I encourage the students to speak up at times to discuss those differences and their cultural backgrounds. I stress the importance of it all because we're all here to learn together. You know highlight this is. The strength your background can definitely add strength to what we're doing.'

'Most lectures I do like case-based learning. It's not like a lecture style. I pre-record a lecture. And it has a quiz embedded in it. Usually less than 30 minutes, and then my live session is a tutorial like group work with students having to do their own work, essentially, rather than me lecturing them.'

'Often, I'll use breakout groups, breakout rooms, not always, though, sometimes just a group discussion. I like breakout groups that I think with the online space, it tends to be dominated by the more confident students, which is a great, but also it means that the quieter students kind of don't feel like they can speak up. Whereas when you put them in smaller groups, it's much more likely that they'll engage and actually have things to say.'

'I think my advice would just to be as accommodating as you can, because yeah, with any culture, there's things that can impact a student's life. You've got to be very communicative, I suppose, because you won't know what you don't hear. And maybe more often than not, you'll find that First Nation students may not feel confident to voice their issues...'

Lecture content demonstrating cultural competence

- Acknowledgement of Country on the front of the Units
- The Cultural Safety and Competence Unit in Nursing (CUC 107)
- Not universalising the experience of Indigenous people
- Knowledge of diversity is important
- Learning materials and readings by Indigenous people
- Work with Indigenous guest lecturers

'Guest lecturers can present their perspectives on topics from their worldview and talk about their experience in community. Can see directly how knowledge can be applied in the field.'

Culturally appropriate resources useful to effectively engage First Nations Undergraduate students

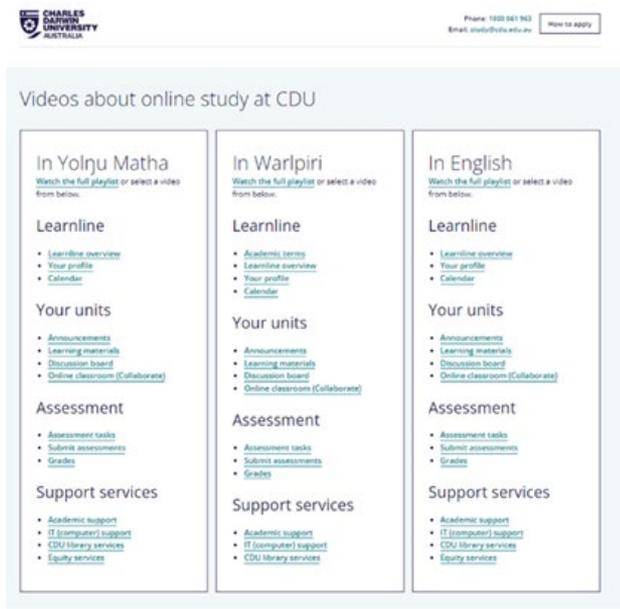
- **SMS4DeadlyDads** sends short texts with tips, info and links to your phone just when you and your baby need it <https://www.sms4dads.com.au/deadly-dads/>
- **Online training about Yolŋu culture and worldviews** <https://mushroom-crocodile-cwer.squarespace.com/online-training>
- **Aboriginal K-12 Education** <https://brewongle.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/aboriginal-education-k-12-vol-1.pdf>
- **Centre for Remote Health** <https://www.crh.org.au/centre-for-remote-health-health-care-manuals>
- **Health, Psychology, Mental Health** Darren Garvey's thesis <https://independent.academia.edu/GarveyDarren> and <https://espace.curtin.edu.au/handle/20.500.11937/249>

Culturally appropriate resources useful to effectively engage First Nations Undergraduate students (cont.)

- Directions for research practice in **decolonising methodologies**: Contending with paradox <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/205979912111006288>
- **Emily Castell** - Critical Reflexivity in Indigenous and Cross-cultural Psychology: A Decolonial Approach to Curriculum? <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ajcp.12291>
- Downloadable education resources for educators to use with both adults and children to teach people how to **manage money better** (Games, I-talk stories, Video plays, Audio files and more) <https://moneymob.org.au/play-and-learn/>
- **WellMob** brings together online resources made by and for our mob. Here you will find websites, apps, podcasts, videos, helplines, social media and online programs all with a focus on social and emotional wellbeing. <https://wellmob.org.au/key-resources/>

Culturally appropriate resources useful to effectively engage First Nations Undergraduate students (cont.)

CDU Indigenous resources



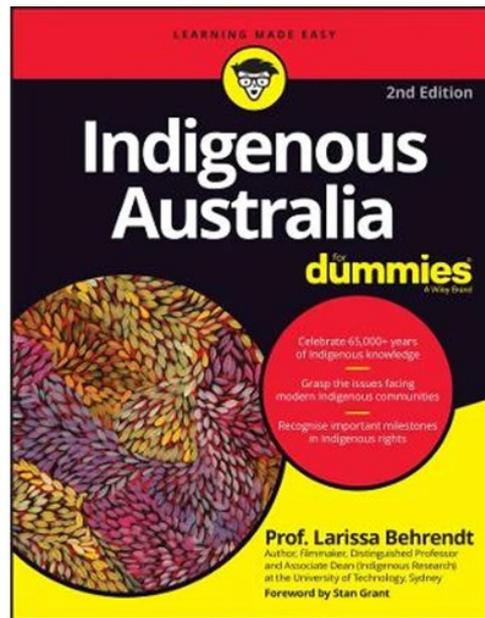
CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Phone: 1800 061 963
Email: stud@cdu.edu.au [How to apply](#)

Videos about online study at CDU

In Yolngu Matha	In Warlpiri	In English
<p>Watch the full playlist or select a video from below.</p> <p>Learnline</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learnline overview Your profile Calendar <p>Your units</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announcements Learning materials Discussion board Online classroom (Collaborate) <p>Assessment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment tasks Submit assessments Grades <p>Support services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic support IT (computer) support CDU library services Equity services 	<p>Watch the full playlist or select a video from below.</p> <p>Learnline</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic series Learnline overview Your profile Calendar <p>Your units</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announcements Learning materials Discussion board Online classroom (Collaborate) <p>Assessment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment tasks Submit assessments Grades <p>Support services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic support IT (computer) support CDU library services Equity services 	<p>Watch the full playlist or select a video from below.</p> <p>Learnline</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learnline overview Your profile Calendar <p>Your units</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announcements Learning materials Discussion board Online classroom (Collaborate) <p>Assessment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment tasks Submit assessments Grades <p>Support services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic support IT (computer) support CDU library services Equity services

Indigenous Australians for dummies



Lecture delivery demonstrating cultural competence

- Have Acknowledgement of Country up front
- Use storytelling and provide real-world practice scenarios
- Accommodate the feedback from students
- Be inclusive in your language that you value the contribution from all students with all cultural backgrounds including Indigenous

'It is also about setting class boundaries. I always make it a point to say, look, you're not all training to be social workers. Can you please reflect in your heart and mind about respect in the classroom? And how do you manifest that respect and one way of doing it is being mindful that we'll have indigenous students, we will have international students. These things are critical.'

'Co-teach with an Indigenous educator. Different skill sets and levels of knowledge, and perspectives represented. Authority is required to speak about different things.'

'For the remote students, it's most beneficial and good to join synchronously so that we can be there together, which means calling up the local organizations to get the person to get them on the Zoom.'

Experience of First Nations Undergraduate students at CDU – Pastoral care and support

- Services include engagement calls, emails, text messaging, mentoring, study planning and organizing tutors
- Provide safe places
- Student advocacy
- Learnline support

Experience of First Nations Undergraduate students at CDU – Pastoral care and support

'We do a lot of engagement calls, emails, text messages, however we can get in contact with them. And whatever their preference is. We do a bit of mentoring, helping students with their study plans, things like that and organizing tutoring.'

'Giving them a safe space here, where they can sit and feel relaxed and comfortable. And you know, if there is a problem that there's someone going to be here for them to ask, you know, we provide sort of tea, coffee, a bit of food as well. It's their space.'

'We advocate for the students with the different lectures and things like that. Refer them to different services that they may require, whether that be housing, counselling, and anything like that. That's a broad range. Yeah, basically, whatever they need help with. We'll try and help them. Our goal is to see them succeed.'

'Our first year students who come in here, they are very confused to begin with. They do require a lot of support from us in helping them with the different things like Learnline. Submitting is a big one. We cover all of that in our Academic Skills Workshop, but until they actually put everything into practice, it's different. You can sit there and listen and watch and learn that way, but it's always different when you actually do it.'

Experience of First Nations Undergraduate students at CDU – Pastoral care and support (cont.)

- Supporting students in pathways from VET to HE
- Individualise student study plans/loads considering work/life balance
- Consider group tutoring as an option
- Consider allocating an Indigenous student support person role to an academic staff member in discipline areas

Experience of First Nations Undergraduate students at CDU – Pastoral care and support

'We also have different pathways which I struggle with. I don't think the university always provides enough pastoral care around what those pathways look like we say create pathways, but having worked in the VET sector, and knowing that students come in from the VET sector, and they've got no idea about basic academic skills, and then suddenly we slam them with HE. They must write a 2000-word assignment and use APA referencing, and by the way, don't plagiarise, you know, it's quite demanding, but they don't get those skills in the VET sector. So I don't think we always do proper pastoral care.'

'My definition of pastoral care is providing not false hope to students but actually sitting down. Last year I had a First Nations student. And she was really struggling. She was doing 4 subjects. And she had a wonderful opportunity as she was selected in the AFLW and she said - I'm struggling with four subjects and doing AFLW. I said just back to two subjects. And nobody had said that to her. Nobody had said - drop two subjects. Everyone had said oh we'll give you extensions. But the reality is, you get dropped two subjects take this wonderful opportunity and you can always get to your study later, pick it up later, and that's what I mean. Sometimes I don't think we actually sit down and we help students to pass. We allow an extension or see academic data but no actual pastoral support. The focus should be on the student capacity to actually learn the material in the semester not just be assessment focused.'

'Group tutoring model in nursing - got some models that are working like, particularly in nursing, where we've got we, because there was always feedback that everyone's working, students are working in isolation, and all that sort of stuff. So now we've got a model where we have this group tutor with this amazing tutor. And they can all connect and and they're doing really well.'

Experience of First Nations Undergraduate students at CDU – Pastoral care and support (cont.)

'I allocated a staff member as an Indigenous students support person.... unfortunately, didn't have an Indigenous staff member to be able to allocate that to, but they had a wonderful staff member in who was based in Alice Springs, actually, who basically went through all the courses, knew all who all our Indigenous students were, and reached out to all of them. And for those ones who were local to Alice Springs, we got some funding, you know, wasn't just to put on a morning tea, just every now and then. And then when she came up to Darwin campus would do the same up here as well, just to get a little bit of a community of practice going. And that was, that was great. And it was things then that, like I encountered today, so if that student had something going on, that they needed that academic support for across the courses and the units they had, they knew where to go. And that person had enough knowledge about all the units, the course the content, who's teaching what, to be able to be in a position where they could be that one stop shop.'

Tell-Tale signs of student success

- Asking questions
- Asking for help
- Engaging with formative assessments
- Going beyond the nominated class readings
- Requesting additional information

'The people who show up here, the people who actually ask for help, ask for tutoring – these are the students I've seen who are successful.'

'People who are using the different scholarships, different services like career trackers, where they can get internships, people who try and take on these things. They are the ones who are keen. They are asking us for help with these things.'

'If they're engaging, asking questions, even if they say ...this might be a stupid question...Even if they're sending a panic email, you know they are reaching out and they trust you enough to send it.'

Focus group – Casuarina



September, 2023

The key takeaways include:

- **Personalised support** for external students works well. External nursing students feel overwhelmed with course content. They may lack confidence or awareness to seek support tailored to First Nations students' needs.
- **Wrap-up support works**. It requires ongoing communication & effort: lecturers, unit coordinators, First Nation support unit, First Nations tutorial support working together.
- First Nations students may not visit the **Library**, which highlights the need for its staff to build (maintain) relationships with First Nations student support team. Library should be seen as part of the wider support network.
- International students @ Library front desk – comms training needed.

Focus group – Casuarina – cont'd

"They're [unit coordinators, lecturers] very open for support and for help, but they're so *inundated with work* (...) they're not sure where (...) to go"

" (...) unit coordinators (...) and course coordinators should be able to feel like, if they don't already, reach out to First Nations Leadership to build those connections and (...) put faces to names instead of just emails coming through (...)"

Safe unit content and delivery. The onus is on course coordinators and lecturers. They need time, guidance and 'personal touch' to make units & their delivery style safe.

Cultural competence in teaching. Students come back to classes where they are encouraged to use their lived experiences in the academic context. More recognition of their experiences in assignments is needed – may challenge the traditional emphasis on external citations over personal stories. Relatable case studies but should not present First Nations communities in stereotypical ways.

What helps retention? A First Nations academic lead (e.g. in midwifery) permits students to 'see themselves' at the university. A First Nations PASS mentor. Maintaining learning plans to enable their personal life to happen. *Personal, caring* interactions with individual students. Prompt, personalised response/call from any of the support teams.

Focus group – Sydney



November, 2023

The key takeaways include:

- the need for proactive pastoral care and support for First Nations students
- the importance of connecting students with specific services and support networks
- the value of having a dedicated First Nations academic to support students, and
- the significance of identifying and supporting First Nations students in their academic journey.

A health lecturer with 700 students in class proposed to keep everything proactive - give the lecturer the list of students (if the students agree) and work with students proactively, not reactively. In the sense put the strategy on top of the hill, not the ambulance at the bottom.

Also, In Health as a HEPP, there are two sessions for academics and cultural Safety in the classroom and Trauma Informed Practice – CDU has to learn better from our own successful projects and implement those across the Faculties.



Holistic view from Sydney

- it's crucial to prioritise connecting with the Darwin team and providing support for the 10% of First Nations students in NSW, especially since the highest Indigenous population lives in Western Sydney.
- To attract and support these students, we could consider running special information sessions, offering cultural competency training, and collaborating with other universities in the area to provide more opportunities, for example Jumbunna Institute.
- We have ongoing midwifery placements in Western Sydney, so we should focus on providing support and resources for First Nations students in this field.

Common observations by focus groups.

Importance of all CDU support services for First Nations students ◦

Academic leads within Faculties who are First Nations Australians are relatable (students can 'see themselves' in the academic environment)

Personal relationships, ongoing assessments of student circumstances (conversations, prompt responses) and care thought to assist retention at CDU. This, together with the support services can help 'soften' the turns students have to take.

Course coordinators and lecturers – guidance needed to help them make contents and delivery of the units safe and accessible to First Nations students. They need time to do this.

Intended project outputs – Lecturer and student guides booklets (2024)

‘My advice to other First Nations students is to study a field which has interested them for some time and will lead them toward a rewarding career path’

‘What got me through was being able to sit down with a fellow First Nations nurse and process/reconcile the differences in 'White healthcare' and what was expected of me verses how I felt. Having a mentor in the workplace made all the difference’

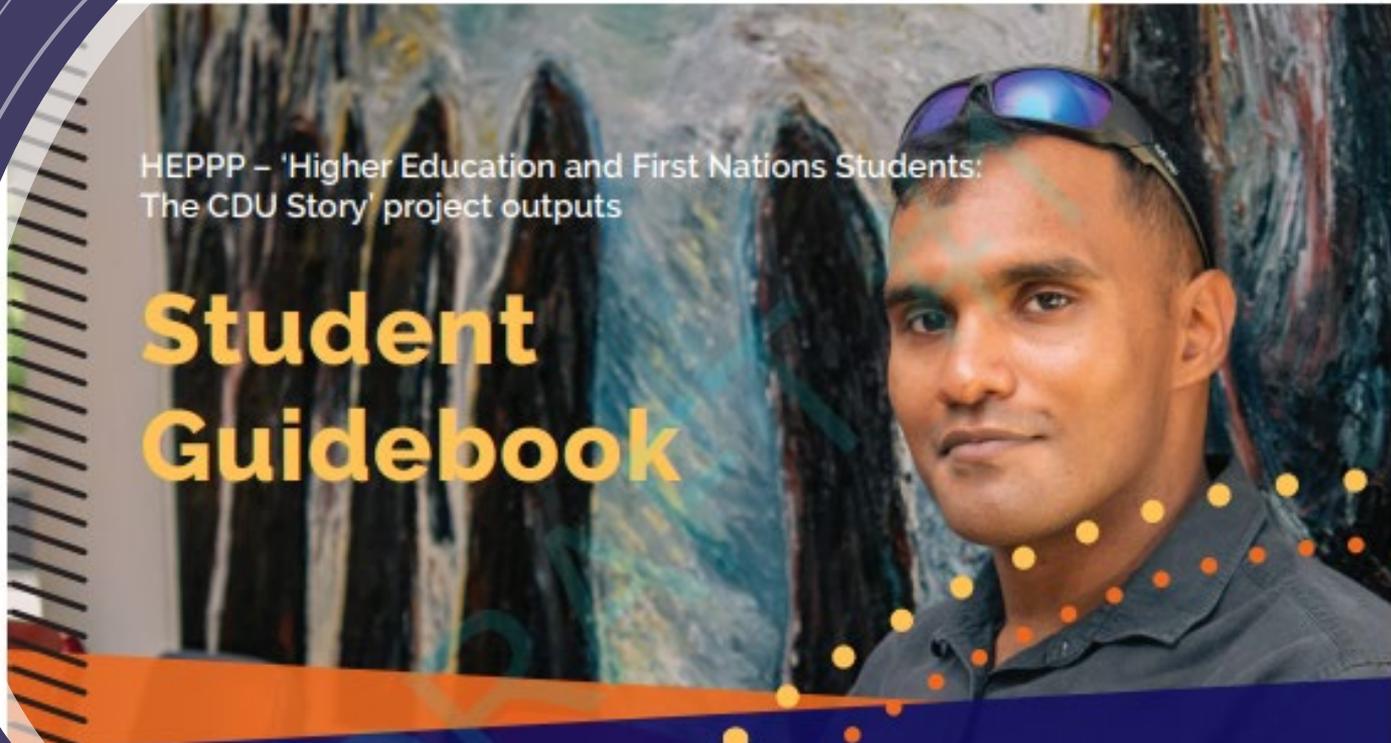
HEPPP – 'Higher Education and First Nations Students:
The CDU Story' project outputs

Lecturer Guidebook



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HEPPP – 'Higher Education and First Nations Students:
The CDU Story' project outputs

Student Guidebook

Thank You

Talk to us

tracy.woodroffe@cdu.edu.au
kate.golebiowska@cdu.edu.au
guzyl.hill@cdu.edu.au
alicia.boyle@cdu.edu.au

Project Website

<https://firstnationssuccess.cdu.edu.au/higher-education-experience-for-first-nations-students-at-cdu/>