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Enabling Indigenous wellbeing in higher education: Indigenous Australian youth-devised strategies and solutions

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Abstract
Indigenous youth comprise over half of the Indigenous Australian population; however, there is a scarcity of research that focuses on improving Indigenous Australians' wellbeing in higher education. The purpose of this study was to identify Indigenous-devised strategies to support wellbeing of salience to Indigenous Australian higher education students. Using Indigenous methodology, Indigenous youth ($N=7$; aged between 18 and 25 years) studying at three higher education institutions in Australia participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis identified strategies and solutions for supporting and enhancing Indigenous youth wellbeing in higher education. Participants suggested that their wellbeing would benefit from increased opportunities for them to gain role models. They also suggested culturally supportive higher education environments were critical and could be achieved by employing more Indigenous academics and Indigenous mentors to implement personalised student support, introducing mandatory cultural competency training for all staff, and employing culturally safe counselling services. Indigenous youth also suggested strategies for enhancing institutional policy such as ensuring Indigenous culture and perspectives were taught across all faculties; developing reconciliation action plans, financial support, and scholarships to require proof of Aboriginality and evidence of hardship; and an institutional wellbeing strategy designed to support Indigenous students' wellbeing.

Keywords Higher education · Indigenous youth · Wellbeing

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Introduction

For Indigenous Australian retention and completion rates to rise, and parity[1] to be achieved in participation in and completion of higher education, Indigenous students' wellbeing needs to be identified and supported. Despite the benefits of higher education and attempts from universities to support Indigenous students' success in higher education, Indigenous students in Australia remain to have lower retention and completion rates compared to non-Indigenous students. Indigenous students are only 47% likely to complete a degree in 9 years compared to non-Indigenous students at 74% (Universities Australia, 2021). Over the past 3 decades, Australian higher education institutions have attempted to make their environments supportive of Indigenous students by introducing strategies such as Indigenous student support units, Indigenous tutorial assistance schemes, reconciliation action plans, cultural competence training for staff, and the creation of identified Indigenous staff positions (Bin-Sallik, 2003; Coates, 2020). However, there has been little focus on Indigenous student wellbeing itself and the need to listen and respond to and leverage the voice and agency of Indigenous youth studying in higher education.

In Australia, Indigenous youth represent over 50% of the Indigenous population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] 2018). However, Indigenous youth's wellbeing remains at risk with elevated rates of suicide, suicide ideation, and self-harm (Dickson et al., 2019). Indeed, Indigenous youth experience several wellbeing challenges which include racism and discrimination; intergenerational trauma; financial stress; and social, historical, and political determinants, which are largely associated with the effects of colonisation and government policies which have undermined the rights of Indigenous people (Haswell et al., 2014; Sherwood, 2013). Unfortunately, Indigenous youth also represent over 50% of Australia's youth detention despite only being 5% of Australia's youth population (AIHW 2020). These alarming statistics represent a social justice issue that requires further community-led research and partnership with the voices and wellbeing of Indigenous youth and communities at the epicentre.

Higher education is a game changer in that education improves Indigenous wellbeing and chances of employment, and also enables self-determination, and generates intergenerational wealth (Universities Australia, 2022). However, despite Indigenous enrolment rates having doubled over the past decade (UA 2022), Indigenous retention rates, according to the first Indigenous Strategy Annual report (UA 2021), "have remained in the 72 to 76 per cent range since 2008, with non-Indigenous students typically remaining in the 85 to 88 per cent range" (p. 30).

Universities Australia (UA), in their UA (2022) Indigenous Strategy, has stated their commitment to "student success": "For students, the focus will shift to success, in particular improving completion rates. Access to university has improved greatly, but completion rates continue to lag" (p. 19). UA defines student success as "a university experience that fosters the successful completion of a degree that sets up students for favourable outcomes" (p. 22). We argue that for Indigenous students to gain thrive within a university environment and earn a university degree, research-derived strategies and policies that are salient for Indigenous youth need to be identified and put into place by universities to support and promote student wellbeing.

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[1] Parity refers to the completion rate for indigenous students to be equally the same as non-Indigenous university students.

The positive outcomes of graduating with a degree are clear. As of 2018-2019, Indigenous graduates with a higher education degree had higher rates of employment (79%) compared to Indigenous people without a degree (30%) (AIHW, 2023). This difference highlights the important impact university completion has on increasing Indigenous employment and social mobility. Unfortunately, for many students regardless of their background, studying can be a stressful period with high rates of anxiety and financial stress (Haswell et al., 2014).

A survey conducted by Headspace (2016) in Australia reported that 65% of tertiary respondents aged 16–25 years had high or very high psychological distress, and 35.4% had thoughts of suicide or self-harm. In particular, a study by the AIHW (2018) found that 67% Indigenous youth aged 15–24 years experienced low to moderate levels of psychological distress. These statistics highlight the urgency of enabling social and emotional wellbeing and the need for higher education institutions to listen to Indigenous youth voices and action their recommendations pertaining to their wellbeing.

Leaders of tomorrow: Indigenous youth wellbeing in higher education

Young people constitute a considerably higher proportion of the Indigenous population than the general population. As the young people, they are an important group in realising community visions and building community capacity. Equally as important, as the next generation of parents and community leaders, how they fare during their youth will greatly influence the future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society and culture (Haswell et al., 2014, p. 18).

The above quote highlights the importance of Indigenous youth wellbeing and youth's significant influence on the future success and thriving of indigenous communities. Indigenous youth voices are important to listen to as research shows that in 2018, 25% of Indigenous students were aged between 25 and 34 years (AIHW 2023). This demonstrates that while the majority of Indigenous students are mature-aged students, many of them are considered being "youth". While we define youth as being under the age of 25 years, we also recognise that some communities and organisations define youth up to the age of 35 years (AIHW 2023).

There is increasing scholarly interest in Indigenous students' voice and agency in educational research in school systems (e.g. Antone, 2000; Donovan, 2015) and in higher education (e.g. Amundsen, 2019). Durmush et al.'s (2021) research with Indigenous higher education youth in Australia identified the following drivers of wellbeing: having connection to Country, culture, family and kinship, community connection, community wellbeing, spirituality, and having a strong sense of self. The study highlighted that some determinants were both a driver and barrier, such as family and kinship due to issues such as family violence. According to the study, Indigenous youth conceptualised their wellbeing as holistic, interconnected, collective, subjective, and multidimensional (Durmush et al., 2021).

The research also highlights that for Indigenous youth wellbeing to flourish, higher education environments need holistic cultural support, meaning that university support goes beyond just academic and financial support such that students' cultural needs and obligations are also supported and valued. For many Indigenous students, studying at university can add further stress and challenges, which have been identified by previous literature (Durmush et al., 2021; Behrendt et al., 2012; Hutchings et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2019; Trudgett, 2009). These challenges include being the first in the family to study at university; lack of family role models

or family members to provide support; leaving country, family, or community behind to pursue studying; financial stress and worry; racism and discrimination; and lack of feeling culturally safe. In any case, irrespective of age, there is a strong need for more evidence-based research to identify youth-defined wellbeing needs in higher education so that future theory, policy, and practice align with what is important to youth's wellbeing.

The present investigation

The overarching aim of this research study was to identify strategies that Indigenous youth perceive are important to cultivate wellbeing while undertaking higher education. The research question posed was as follows: What do Indigenous youth attending university perceive as salient strategies for enhancing their wellbeing in higher education? Using Indigenous yarning methodology and semi-structured interviews, Indigenous youth ($N=7$; aged between 18 and 25 years) studying at three higher education institutions in Australia participated in the study (Barlo et al., 2021).

Conceptual frameworks

Indigenous standpoint theory

This research gives voice to Indigenous youth and prioritises Indigenous knowledge, epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies. Martin Nakata's (2007) theoretical perspective known as Indigenous standpoint theory (IST) aligns with this research. IST advocates for Indigenous knowledge and worldviews to be maintained and put at the epicentre of research (Nakata, 2007). Nakata acknowledges that Indigenous knowledge is located in a contested knowledge space such as Indigenous and western knowledge, known as the "cultural interface". The cultural interface recognises the two competing knowledge systems and the everyday reality of Indigenous peoples negotiating their knowledge, culture, and epistemes as western knowledge remains to be understood as the "universal truth" (Bullen & Flavell, 2021; Nakata, 2007). Indeed, IST asks the core question, "How are Indigenous students, academics and researchers in disciplines to navigate the complexities of Indigenous experience within such contested spaces?" (p. 346). Nakata's response to overcoming the challenges of the cultural interface is through employing IST principles to (1) "Generate accounts of communities of Indigenous people in contested knowledge spaces"; (2) "Afford agency to people"; and (3) "Acknowledge the everyday tensions, complexities and ambiguities as the very conditions that produce the possibilities in the spaces between Indigenous and non-Indigenous positions" (Nakata, 2007, p. 217).

The present investigation embeds the three principles of IST. The first principle relates to the present investigation, as the Indigenous youth are situated in contested knowledge spaces in higher education institutions. The second principle is reflected through the aim and vision of this research, which is for Indigenous higher education youth within contested knowledge spaces to exercise agency, that is, having a say on issues that impact their wellbeing and overall higher education experience.

The third principle is adopted through the process of youth reflecting upon their experiences of everyday complexities and tensions of being an Indigenous student in a

white-dominated knowledge space. Agency is achieved through the process of telling their stories, sharing experiences, voicing recommendations, and having control over research which impacts the future of their communities. This way, youth are contributing to revolutionising higher education institutions and are challenging the cultural interface by privileging Indigenous knowledge and worldviews.

Self-determination theory

A key component of this research was to enable Indigenous youth to exercise their voice and agency and determine on their terms what is important to enabling educational success and wellbeing in higher education. Self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) aligns with the goals of this research, as it informs understandings of what motivates individuals and thus enables healthy functioning and wellbeing. The theory recognises three factors all human beings need in order to live a happier and healthier life: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomy refers to the need for an individual to endorse their behaviour and have a choice in how to behave. Likewise, in this research we deemed Indigenous youth as the rightful experts and knowledge holders of their wellbeing, as we recognise that for Indigenous youth to flourish, it is imperative that youth's voices and perspectives guide future theory, research, and practice. Relatedness recognises human's need to have relationality, connection, and support from others to feel motivated, cared for, and loved. Historically, government policies which imposed colonial violence and exclusion were responsible for the disruption and removal of Indigenous children, families, and kinship systems, making a detrimental impact on Indigenous peoples' relatedness. Lastly, competence is described as the need for an individual to master their own environment and develop skills to be able to succeed. Satisfaction of competence needs is accomplished firstly through prioritising youth-devised strategies and solutions enabling youth's quotes to identify how higher education institutions can promote and leverage their wellbeing, and secondly, through higher education institutions' promoting and leveraging Indigenous youth voice and wellbeing. Once youth wellbeing is supported, holistically youth will be able to master the higher education space, enabling them to thrive and succeed. In summary, SDT reflects the goals and aims of this research which is to ensure Indigenous youth voice and agency is leveraged to identify Indigenous-derived salient strategies for enabling wellbeing in higher education.

Methodology

Positionality statements

The lead author of this paper conducted this research as part of her PhD research. Dr. Georgia Durmush is a proud Wailwan and Gomeroi[2]2 woman who was born and raised on Biddegal Country, and is a research fellow. Her way of knowing, being, and doing as an Indigenous young woman informed and guided her research inquiry and practice to ensure culturally safe and respectful relationships, and reciprocity were achieved.

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[2] Wailwan and Gomeroi are Indigenous nations groups in Australia.

Professor Rhonda Craven is an accomplished researcher with over 30 years of research experience working closely with Indigenous communities. Her works focus on effective methods of teaching Indigenous students, interventions that make a tangible difference in, and key drivers of educational success.

Professor Alexander Yeung is an expert in cross-cultural studies. He has conducted research in multilingual and multicultural contexts and has worked with numerous Indigenous populations worldwide for over 20 years.

Professor Janet Mooney is a proud Aboriginal, Yuin woman, mother, and academic from the South Coast of NSW. She is an accomplished researcher with demonstrated expertise in qualitative research methodology. She has extensive experience undertaking focus groups and in-depth interviews, providing insights into practice, and conducting research that influences policy.

Dr. Marcus Horwood is a postdoctoral researcher. He is a lead investigator in the Together for Peace (T4P) initiative with the UNESCO Bangkok office. He has partnered with international organisations such as the Institute for Economics and Peace, and the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict to develop an international framework for peace education emphasising the importance of youth agency and participatory action research.

Dr. Diego Vasconcellos is a senior research data analyst. His expertise includes the motivational processes underpinning wellbeing and physical activity behaviour in a variety of contexts, including schools, childhood education and care, and Indigenous wellbeing.

Dr. Alicia Franklin has a doctorate in clinical psychology and is a research program manager. She is a clinical psychologist whose research and practice interests focus on the implementation of evidence-based positive psychology to enhance wellbeing and success across educational, work, and home environments.

Renee Gillane is a proud Wonnarua woman who feels blessed to live and work on her tribal country. She is currently the Upper Hunter co-ordinator for Wonnarua Firesticks, an organisation that is reinvigorating Aboriginal traditional and cultural burning practices for land management in the Hunter Valley, NSW.

Christopher Duncan is an Aboriginal man of Wiradjuri descent and has been born and raised on Dharug Country. He is an associate lecturer (Indigenous) within the Faculty of Education and Arts. He is currently investigating what universities are doing to retain Indigenous students in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the USA.

Research design

Knowledge holders

Participants were Indigenous youth knowledge holders ($N=7$; 4 female and 3 male) who were studying at three higher education institutions in Australia. We use the term knowledge holders to respectfully acknowledge and recognise the significant knowledge, worldviews, and contribution Indigenous youth bring to this research and to their communities.

Materials and procedures

This study stems from a wider doctoral research study which means Indigenous youth participants were recruited from previous studies. Participants were recruited on the basis

of being an Indigenous youth under the age of 25 years and enrolled in a higher education institution. Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the 1-h one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted either through phone call or via online video software platforms (Microsoft Teams and Zoom). The semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate research method as it enabled youth to voice their recommendations and perceptions on the strategies they perceived as vital to cultivate Indigenous youth wellbeing in higher education (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). Semi-structured interviews enabled the Indigenous researcher to carry out Indigenous methodology such as yarning to develop a trustful, culturally safe, and open transparent relationship with the Indigenous youth knowledge holders. The interviewer asked youth knowledge holders the interview questions and enabled youth to respond freely and spontaneously. Youth were asked to clarify a point they had made if necessary, so as to avoid any misinterpretation or bias of information obtained from the interviewee.

Yarning methodology

This research used yarning methodology (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2022) to ensure Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing underpinned the research. Originated from Indigenous peoples in Australia, yarning is simply having a conversation and is a way to exchange knowledge, build connection, relationships, trust, and understanding between people. Notably, it is a way to pass culture and stories down (Dean, 2010; Hughes & Barlo, 2020). Yarning methodology is defined by Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) as a research process which has four phases: social yarning, research topic yarning, collaborative yarning, and therapeutic yarning (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Social yarning is described as having a conversation before the research commences with the knowledge holder, which is informal and unstructured and enables the participant and researcher to develop a connection and relationship. Research topic yarning is either semi- or fully structured and is based on the research questions and gathering information from the participant. Collaborative yarning is defined as a "Yarn that occurs between two or more people where they are actively engaged in sharing information about a research project and or a discussion about ideas. Collaborative yarning in research can involve exploring similar ideas or bouncing different ideas in explaining new concepts" (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, p. 40). Lastly, therapeutic yarning is when a conversation leads to a participant disclosing information to the researcher which is in nature personal and emotional, thus requiring the researcher to be a good listener.

This study only employed three phases: social yarning, research topic yarning, and therapeutic yarning as the research was based on a PhD project which required no research collaborations with participants. However, the researcher used therapeutic yarning in moments where personal information was disclosed and required the researcher to listen and show empathy as well as socially connect with Indigenous youth and yarn about the research topic to prove transparency and trust.

Over the past decade, Indigenous research literature has built on yarning (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2022) and has recognised it as a methodology in its own right. We employed such principles and protocols throughout the research process. A culturally

safe yarning space was established with the Indigenous researcher firstly making the physical space comfortable. The researcher did this by providing morning tea and lunch for students, and also was transparent with the Indigenous youth on who their mob[3] was, where they came from, and what their personal values were before explaining the aim of the research. Notably, as the researcher is an insider research member, this allowed the yarning process to build a relationship. After the yarning space (data collection phase) the researcher employed member checking to ensure their stories and experiences of youth's wellbeing were accurately and respectfully interpreted. Overall, yarning was an important methodology for informing the research practice of this study.

Analyses

Thematic analysis was undertaken to interpret, analyse, and transform the data into themes. Thematic analysis is defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a six-phase process: "1. Familiarising yourself with the data. 2. Generating initial codes. 3. Searching for themes. 4. Reviewing themes. 5. Defining and naming themes. 6. Producing the report" (p. 87). To ensure the coding process was reliable, consistent, and rigorous, inter-rater reliability checks were undertaken between the two coder outputs. The coding process was undertaken using a deductive coding approach. As defined by Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019), "codes in deductive coding are theoretical concepts or themes drawn from the existing literature" (p. 14). Therefore, this involved two researchers to use the themes from the social and emotional wellbeing model (Dudgeon et al., 2014) and the multidimensional student wellbeing model (Marsh et al., 2019) to establish a coding model, as both models reflect Indigenous conceptions of wellbeing. Following, two Indigenous researchers conducted a word frequency count to assess the number of times a theme was mentioned. Indigenous methodology such as yarning methodology (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2022) was used by the two Indigenous researchers to discuss the themes through exchanging Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing to come to an agreement and ascertain the accuracy of the themes in telling the story of the data.

Ethical considerations

All knowledge holders signed an informed consent and had the right to withdraw at any time, and to remain anonymous at all times. This study was approved by the university's ethics team and is in adherence with the National Health and Medical Research Council (2018) guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Communities and the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research (2019).

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[3] Mob is a term Indigenous peoples from Australia use to describe each other as a community and collective.

Findings

To ensure each knowledge holder's identity and privacy was protected, each person was given a pseudonym. The research question is as follows: What do Indigenous youth attending university perceive as the solutions and strategies to enhancing their wellbeing in higher education? Each theme identified in the data is presented below.

Inclusive and supportive Indigenous units Francine voiced the need for educational institutions to create more of a welcoming supportive environment in Indigenous units, to foster a community that is more inclusive: "I feel like better support and a community that's a bit more welcoming. I know for myself at [de-identified] Uni, that I know other people have said that they don't come to the group [Indigenous unit] because they feel judged and people are cliquey".

Francine suggested that it would be useful for Indigenous units to be in contact with students on a more regular basis. She said,

> "I think just contacting students more, making sure that there's a space that everyone feels comfortable about going to because there is the space there, but making sure—maybe the people, the staff that could come to the [de identified] Centre and sit in there a bit more and include other people to introduce other people to each other so they feel supported. Students don't feel like they have to go on their own and talk to people when they might be nervous about it".

Francine also advocated that the role of Indigenous support staff could be influential in creating a socially inclusive environment. She also emphasised that because of their influential role, staff need to be inclusive and it is important that, "Staff aren't part of making it a bad culture. That they're actually including students instead of becoming part of the clique and then excluding people".

Jackson also spoke about student support and higher education staff needing to build more of a relationship with their students, such as having more face-to-face interaction. For example, "I feel like it could definitely be improved and definitely in terms of putting faces to names. So, I've had a couple of phone calls with people from the Careers Centre, they just call up and check in. But it probably would be good to have more face-to-face stuff, just to feel like you're connected to someone who's looking out for you".

Monique spoke about the positive experience of feeling supported by and being safe in the Indigenous unit at their university. There is also a need for the whole institution to provide a sense of belonging, safety, and inclusiveness:

> I think it's all about just embedding it more deeply and consistently and maybe that could look like—I'm not—I don't know, how can I phrase that? It's like— I don't know for uni—you know the university design for learning, how there's the—you design things to be accessible for everyone. I feel like if the uni could take that approach specifically with Indigenous people in mind. They should be designing things so they're accessible to everyone but accessible to Indigenous people that don't have that step up. I don't mean that in the sense of money but when—I feel like the ATSIS [Indigenous student unit] unit does it pretty well, when Indigenous students come in to welcome them and make them feel supported and safe. That does happen just through the ATSIS unit; it would be nice if there was—I don't know. I don't quite know how to phrase that. [Inaudible] change

the uni vibe as a whole, because the ATSIS unit itself is so welcoming and so nice, so how do you extrapolate that sense of belonging and safety into a whole institution.

In summary, providing an inclusive and culturally supportive higher education environment stands out to be a major theme summarising the youth's voices. In particular, students' quotes highlight the role indigenous student units have in creating a sense of belonging and place of cultural safety for indigenous students. However, more needs to be done in making the university as a whole a place where they feel safe and connected.

Indigenous units to target wellbeing Francine suggested there was a need for institutions to develop wellbeing policies. For example, "Well, they could have an Indigenous wellbeing policy which looks at all of these different things and strategies they can do to improve wellbeing. Then that in turn will impact successful completion rates and things like that".

Financial scholarship support Financial support such as scholarships was noted by Francine as a vital area for higher education institutions to focus on in supporting youth's wellbeing. Francine shared her positive experience of having a scholarship and paid internship to support her financially. She revealed,

> I was supported for my scholarship, which was amazing and without that, I'd have to work and that's been amazing for me. Then also CareerTrackers has been amazing, being able to do the internships and that community and CareerTrackers*(internship program for Indigenous university students) has been incredible. I've made lifelong friends and so that's just been really helpful for my wellbeing and opportunities to achieve. Support has just been amazing.

Including Indigenous perspectives and culture within the institution For Jasmin, it was matters concerning cultural safety that she perceived as important for higher education institutions to implement, to support, and empower youth's wellbeing. She was concerned about non-Indigenous academics teaching Indigenous perspectives within the classroom, which she considered detrimental to her wellbeing. For instance,

> ... how do you expect to be able to include Indigenous perspectives into your curriculum? You're not going to be able to because you're going to be picking up perspectives from a textbook, again. That's not what we want. We're not about textbooks. We're about those connections. We're about those relationships". She also mentioned the need to acknowledge and connect with Indigenous culture beyond events such as (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee—NAIDOC).

As Jasmin voiced, "I think trying to champion our culture whenever they can and not just during NAIDOC week".

Bryson's recommendation was for universities to teach Indigenous culture and ways of being, knowing, and doing across all faculties and disciplines. For instance,

> I guess maybe a bit more—because I know some degrees study Indigenous culture quite a bit but often—like I do engineering, I don't really see it at all. I don't know, maybe you could somehow have—I don't know, some more Indigenous exposure in STEM degrees somehow. ... For engineering, you could probably have something like there's a town that needs to have this amount of houses in it, this is an Indigenous town and there's these rules or whatever. I don't know, have some sort of—do you know what I mean? Like a problem they need to solve drawing on

Indigenous culture, so it can—so people can see that more, I guess. Just to remind them.

Hence, for Bryson and Jasmin the strategies to enhancing student wellbeing were embedding Indigenous culture, knowledge, and perspectives being taught across all disciplines as a solution to achieving cultural safety and student belonging.

Employing more Indigenous academics and Indigenous staff Monique advocated that there was a need for more Indigenous staff to be employed within the university as a solution to enabling cultural safety, increasing self-efficacy, and creating a sense of belonging and role modelling for Indigenous youth:

> I think probably by employing more Indigenous staff in positions of—I'm not—not power but like what I was saying before. The only people that would be speaking on the behalf of Indigenous people are Indigenous people. Yeah, I think that and, in that sense, you'd have a lot more representation and that would increase your self-efficacy, if you can see someone that looks like you, succeeding and thriving. I think that would really help.

Jasmin suggested that institutional change was important. For instance, institutions could employ more Indigenous academics to Indigenise and decolonise the academy. She emphasised the importance of having Indigenous academics to provide more cultural understanding, knowledge, and community connection: "Again, it's as simple as doing an acknowledgement of country properly, bringing in more Black academics when you're doing any sort of thing. At the moment I'm in discussions with the School of Psychology at [de-identified] uni and being like, you have no connection to the community".

Jasmin also emphasised the importance of Indigenous academics teaching Indigenous content as she felt some non-Indigenous staff lacked cultural understanding, held unconscious bias, and spoke from a privileged position: "They just kind of showed the stats but they didn't really talk about what was there. I was kind of like, oi, hold up. I'm a bit uncomfortable with that. Why do we have to learn about their attitudes about us if we're not actually going to learn about their attitudes, we're just going to look at it and be like, oh yeah, they still think we get a free house". Hence, Monique and Jasmin's quotes highlight the important need for higher education institutions to employ more Indigenous academics and professional staff to decolonise and Indigenise the academy and make it a place of belonging for Indigenous students.

Reconciliation action plans (RAP) Jasmin also emphasised the importance of every higher education institution having a RAP plan to provide direction and employ strategies to support Indigenous wellbeing, retention, and completion of higher education. For instance, "That's what I think that universities should definitely be focusing on. They've got RAP plans. I think that every university in Australia has to have a RAP plan now. It's like, all right, go do it. Go implement that. Go talk to community… for psychology, go talk to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander psychologists".

Hence, the strategies to cultivate youth wellbeing according to students include embedding Indigenous perspectives within the curriculum, employing more Indigenous academics, and implementing RAP plans.

Indigenous student role models Bryson recommended that institutions create opportunities and a platform for Indigenous students to yarn and connect. He suggested that a university student portal or Facebook page could be effective. For example,

> Yeah, I guess with the thing you said about role models, it'll be—it would be good to know more about what the Indigenous youth at university are doing. So it's hard to have a role model if you don't know what any of them are doing. So if there's a really successful Indigenous student who's achieving all this, I wouldn't even know about it. If you know what I mean? It would be—I don't know, maybe if there was some sort of portal or—I know they have a Facebook page that they post things like that on but I don't know. Maybe some sort of university portal where you could see this.

Christina identified having Indigenous mentors as a potential strategy to support youth wellbeing. She also suggested that tutoring to support the academic wellbeing of students was useful. For example, "So having mentors and more tutoring and being able to do that for classes every day, like face-to-face instead of online and having your own safe space. A place just for Indigenous people mainly, yeah".

Reviewing higher education institutions' policies Daniel's major concern was the higher education system's role in shaping Indigenous people in becoming westernised versions of themselves. Daniel's trepidation was that a westernised education could result in Indigenous students leaving behind their cultural identity and Indigenous values. As Daniel strongly emphasised,

> It's also quite frustrating because the change that needs to occur really is an entire revamp of what is currently done. People have found a way to circumvent and I guess profit from the system at hand currently. It doesn't adequately serve the needs of our people because it's not set up to. It's set up to create westernised versions of Indigenous people that forgo their ways of really knowing and doing in order for white collar success and white appreciation. It's not about them maintaining their identity and it's certainly not looking to target those who are quite comfortable in their identity or aware.

Revising higher education institutions' response to Aboriginality Daniel suggested that higher education institutions' enrolment policies were problematic in that they target all students who identify as Indigenous, which may not include students who have the lived experience of an Indigenous person. For instance,

> The focus seems to just be accepting of anyone and everyone, which kind of limits, like I was saying before. It is noble and you don't want to start to practise exclusion or limiting the opportunities of others because of factors that are outside of their control. But there's no awareness because the systems aren't accountable to the people that they service. There's no awareness of who it is that they're targeting and who they should be targeting. They don't understand how to do that because a lot of it comes from the university itself, the people that they employ and the people that they look to.

Daniel stressed that this issue is systemic and is of particular concern for the wider Indigenous community and their wellbeing: "The problem is systemic, and universities have created a breeding ground for these new blacks that may identify, but they don't identify with the struggle". He also suggested that universities are providing a cultural

landscape for Indigenous people who have either recently identified or found out their Indigenous heritage later in life:

> If you've only found out about your heritage recently, the university is not the way for you to go about that personal, cultural journey. You need to go back to community and find out for yourself. If you're ready to go to university, then in most regards, you're an adult now and you should be taking it upon yourself to learn and engage. Not to make excuses and not to know. Because it's not good enough. You, by doing that—what systems of oppression have you had to overcome to get to where you are, if you didn't know that you were Indigenous? If you didn't know that you had this heritage? If you didn't know that there are reasons why people that look or sound like you are murdered, killed, raped?

Clearly Daniel had concerns about the systemic problem of enrolling Indigenous students who have never lived as an Indigenous person, nor with trauma and hardship, and therefore do not understand community issues and needs. Interestingly, for Daniel this was a barrier to his wellbeing.

Mandatory cultural competency training for staff and students Jackson voiced cultural competency training as a strategy to promote cultural safety across universities: "So, things like cultural competency, like I know [de-identified] said she does a lot of workshops at the uni with educators. They develop a kinship module that they do. But I feel like more could be done when you have interactions with tutors who obviously haven't received that kind of cultural training".

Support services (counsellors) Christina mentioned the need to create more opportunities for Indigenous students and support services such as counsellors. For instance, "Just having more opportunities for Indigenous people and knowing what support is out there and more services and just having that—like the…Yeah just having counsellors and people that check upon you from time-to-time, making sure that you're going okay. Seeing how you're progressing and making sure that the work that is given like assignments and stuff embraces the culture and people's learning".

Hence, Christina voiced the need for universities to provide more support and opportunities that culturally respond to Indigenous students' wellbeing to ensure students are progressing well and feel that their culture is embraced.

Discussion

This research aimed to identify what Indigenous youth in higher education perceived as strategies to cultivate their wellbeing. The research question was as follows: What do Indigenous youth attending university perceive as the solutions and strategies to enhancing their wellbeing in higher education? Inclusive and supportive Indigenous units was a key theme that youth voiced was critical to their wellbeing. In fact, the majority of Australian universities have support centres dedicated towards Indigenous students. Such centres provide: A space for creating social networks, generating safety, sense of belonging, cultural connection, and providing academic, cultural, social, and financial support (Behrendt et al., 2012; UA 2022). However, while Indigenous youth in the

study appreciated the support the centres provided, they recommended that centre staff members have more of a face-to-face relationship with Indigenous students rather than a distant online interaction as a way for staff to develop rapport and trust. Notably, COVID-19 has played a major role in the disruption of personalised student support and teaching; therefore, university staff must develop alternative ways to better connect and build relationships with Indigenous students. It was also suggested staff should avoid engaging in student cliches which adversely impacted on then key roles of centres in supporting wellbeing.

Employing more Indigenous academics and Indigenous staff was another major theme discussed by youth impacting their wellbeing. The suggestion to see more Indigenous academics employed to decolonise and Indigenise the academy and the whole university is not a new recommendation as it has been advocated by many before (Durmush et al., 2021; Behrendt et al., 2012; Bin-Sallik, 2003; Coates, 2020). The recent UA (2022) Indigenous strategy echoes this recommendation and calls for universities to shift away from access to success, with a focus on supporting Indigenous staff with "opportunity, career development and leadership structures, including opportunity to develop academic research careers and to move into senior positions" (p. 19). Hence, increasing the employment of Indigenous staff is advocated by students to enhance their wellbeing and has the potential to establish a community of Indigenous role models.

Mandatory cultural competency training for staff was advocated by Indigenous youth to ensure university staff are educated and culturally competent and to reduce student's experiences of racism, discrimination, and tokenism which are detrimental to youth's wellbeing and academic success (Durmush et al., 2021).

Globally, many universities have implemented mandatory cultural safety and cultural competency training to university staff to provide meaningful awareness and understanding of Indigenous culture, histories, knowledges, and wellbeing as evident in New Zealand, Australia, USA, and Canada (Kruse et al., 2018; Sorensen et al. 2019; UA 2022). For example, in Canada, the University of Alberta's (2021) Indigenous student success survey report revealed three recommendations voiced by Indigenous students that are needed by staff to be active participants on the truth and reconciliation journey: (1) educate themselves; (2) educate their students; and (3) engage with anti-racism (Glanfield et al., 2022, p. 11). These issues are similar for Australian (UA 2022) and New Zealand (Mayeda et al., 2014) universities. Therefore, mandatory cultural competency training for all university staff has been identified as one strategy for addressing racism and discrimination.

Culturally appropriate counselling services which recognise the continuous impacts of colonisation and the importance of culture, country, and community to Indigenous Australians wellbeing have also been suggested as solutions to enhancing youth's wellbeing in higher education (Dudgeon et al., 2014). Currently in Australia most universities do not offer such counselling services. One exception is La Trobe University which provides culturally appropriate counselling service for Indigenous students whereby the counsellors are of indigenous heritage and their counselling practices are culturally informed. Hence, it is recommended that culturally informed counselling services be introduced to universities more widely to ensure Indigenous students' wellbeing is supported through a holistic cultural lens.

Indigenous students also raised concerns about non-Indigenous students who claimed to be and posed as Indigenous, taking opportunities away from Indigenous people in need of support. Some Australian universities have begun to require students to provide a confirmation of Aboriginality certificate from a Local Aboriginal Land Council or Indigenous community-controlled organisation to address this issue; it is recommended

that universities develop systematic and culturally appropriate processes to ensure Indigenous identity is confirmed.

Another theme voiced by Indigenous youth was the need for university policies to target wellbeing more directly, with a suggestion for all universities to develop an Indigenous wellbeing strategy. More specifically, universities need to focus on supporting Indigenous students and staff wellbeing from a holistic and cultural lens. Reconciliation action plans were advocated by Indigenous youth as the first step to ensuring Indigenous employment opportunities and targets are being met with the goal of increasing more Indigenous staff to embed Indigenous culture and knowledge across faculties. Spaces for Indigenous students to meet mentors and role models is critical for Indigenous youth to feel culturally safe, motivated, and supported to continue studying.

These findings broaden our understanding that Indigenous youth's wellbeing within the higher education space is determined by the institution's commitment, policies, and practices in delivering and embedding cultural safety across the institution. Therefore, Indigenous youth's wellbeing can be better supported on the basis that institutions recognise, respect, and celebrate Indigenous culture, history, voices, strengths, and leadership. This highlights that Indigenous student wellbeing is important to achieving parity and enhancing Indigenous university retention and completion rates. The findings add to the developing knowledge growth of Indigenous youth wellbeing in higher education. This research contributes to IST as it provides a youth higher education perspective of wellbeing and is grounded in a strength-based approach which focuses on solutions and strategies rather than deficits. The research contributes to SDT by offering strategies higher education institutions can embed to enable Indigenous youth autonomy, relatedness, and competence to thrive and flourish. It is important to note that these strategies are likely to be beneficial to all students' wellbeing. Notably, this research increases our understanding of what higher education institutions can practically do to support their wellbeing and what policies they should implement to support, promote, and enhance youth wellbeing.

Strengths and limitations

The small sample size of this study was a clear limitation as the findings do not represent the worldviews and perspectives of the entire population of Australian Indigenous higher education youth and their wellbeing. The timing of study affected the data collection process as the interviews were undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic which meant interviewers were conducted via phone call and online Zoom/Teams platforms and were not conducted in-person as planned. Future research could undertake face-to-face data collection to allow a safe cultural space to discuss contested knowledge spaces. Future research could also benefit from partnering with youth to further investigate how best higher education institutions can support their wellbeing. Notably, this study contributes to an international understanding of Indigenous higher education students' wellbeing by highlighting what the enablers and barriers are to leverage Indigenous youth's wellbeing. It highlights a need to hold higher education institutions accountable to ensure Indigenous wellbeing within the higher education space is sustained, and so future research could assess and interrogate higher education institutions' strategic approach to enabling Indigenous wellbeing.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to give primacy to Indigenous higher education youth's voices and agency and explore what Indigenous youth (aged 18–25) in higher education perceived as strategies and solutions to enhancing and supporting their wellbeing. Our findings reported recommendations from ($N=7$) interviews across three higher education institutions in Australia. The overall findings of this study highlight the importance of listening to Indigenous higher education youth voices and their wellbeing needs.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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