SUPPORTING RETENTION THROUGH ENHANCING EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING: PROMOTING INDIGENOUS STUDENTS ACCESS TO, AND EXPERIENCE OF COUNSELLING AND EQUITY SUPPORT SERVICES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following Report provides findings and recommendations from the project “Supporting retention through enhancing emotional and social well-being: promoting Indigenous students access to, and experience of counselling and equity support services”. This project was granted to Dr Philomena Renner then Acting Head, Counselling Service in collaboration with Janet Mooney, Director Koori Centre, University of Sydney. The grant was funded by the 2009/10 initiative of the DVC (Education) to “promote Indigenous education and encourage and support Indigenous students”.

The research was conducted throughout 2010 with a total of four focus groups including 32 (11.5%) undergraduate and postgraduate ATSI students then enrolled at the University. In addition, five interviews were conducted with Academic and General Staff outside of the Koori Centre nominated because of their demonstrated interest in and involvement with Indigenous students within their Faculties. Themes arising from those interviews were found to correspond with those raised by the students. A final workshop was conducted with staff from the Koori Centre, Student Support Services and Indigenous student representatives that reviewed and reflected upon the collected data and shaped the recommendations outlined in this report. With the exception of the five staff interviews, all data collection and the preparation of this reported were completed by the Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA), who were commissioned to undertake those tasks.

The project was directed by a reference committee known as the “Indigenous Student Well-Being Committee” with membership as follows:

Michelle Blanchard (A/Director, Koori Centre),
Sharon Galleguillos (Lecturer, Koori Centre)
Noeleen Smith (Academic Administrative Officer, Koori Centre)
Tanya Griffiths (Student Administration Officer, Cadigal Special Entry Program)
Sherrie Connors (Student Administration Officer, Block Programs)
Narelle Daniels (Indigenous Student Representative, Student Ambassador)
Craig Ashby (Indigenous Student Representative, Student Ambassador)
John Hobson (Lecturer, Koori Centre)
Lynette Riley (Academic Coordinator, Koori Centre)
Since the undertaking of this research, Sydney University has completed the Review of Indigenous Education, the Phillips KPA Co-curricular review and the University White Paper. Student Administration and Support has also been restructured and is now known as Student Support Services, with the former Counselling Service now Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS).

In addition to the policies and targets recommended by the above reviews and restructures, it is strongly recommended that the following recommendations, arising from this research be supported and implemented as soon as possible.

The Recommendations listed below are grouped according to the service targeted by the recommendations:

**COUNSELLING SERVICE**

- We recommend resources be dedicated to raising awareness of the Counselling Service among Indigenous students. The research indicates a number of opportunities that could be considered:
  - Develop links with the Koori Centre in order to increase referrals and to enhance student confidence. While the success of this approach depends on a partnership approach between the Koori Centre and the Counselling Service, we believe the Counselling Service should drive this. Opportunities for increasing awareness could include presenting to Koori Centre staff at staff meetings, and presenting to students in the workshops conducted by the Koori Centre at the beginning of the year/semester, during the housekeeping sessions for block students, and on the ‘walking tour’.
  - Include information on the Counselling Service in the information package given during orientation, as this can be used later as a reference. Consideration could be given to developing a brief ‘cheat sheet’ or booklet for Indigenous students on services and support, with the Counselling Service identified.
  - Promoting the services through student ambassadors.
  - Include information on the Counselling Service on the USB provided to block students at the end of the block sessions.
  - In any promotion the key messages to deliver are that the service is free, confidential and that walk-in appointments are possible.

- We recommend strategies be adopted to enhance service delivery so that it meets the need of Indigenous students:
  - Staff of the Counselling Service should attend cultural awareness training.
Configure the feasibility of employing an Indigenous counsel or having a counsel based at the Koori Centre or a student support and welfare position at the Koori Centre.

- Develop links/referrals with Indigenous organisations, for example the team attached to the Royal Prince Alfred hospital, or links with the Redfern AMS.
- Pilot an Indigenous-specific workshop at the beginning of the year/semester that targets specific issues that Indigenous students face: e.g. ‘a survival guide for Indigenous students’ that explores issues of identity, homesickness, time management/managing high workloads and accessing support (financial and emotional).
- Display a statement about cultural competency and links with the Koori Centre in the service.
- Review the specific needs identified for the various student segments (detailed in section 3.7) and assess priorities and relevance for the Counselling Service, or for a partnership between the Counselling Service and the Koori Centre.

**FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE**

A number of recommendations are provided in order to improve access to financial assistance for Indigenous students:
- Review the feasibility of providing an allowance that assists block students when on prac, for example a meal, travel and clothing allowance.
- Provide students with information on cadetships/traineeships.
- Review the relevance of offering financial literacy programs (through the ANZ or the Fred Hollows foundation) during orientation and/or workshops on financial assistance and scholarship options (which also includes a discussion on the rights and responsibilities of students).
- Include information on financial assistance on the USB provided to block students at the end of the block sessions.

Although not the target for investigation in this project the following recommendations arise out of student comments and may facilitate access and liaison with other student support services.

**KOORI CENTRE**

With regards to the Koori Centre, the recommendations include:
- Provide a noticeboard in the common room and computer room at the Koori Centre that includes contact details for student support services and financial assistance.
- Provide the Counselling Service with details of the block timetable, so they are aware that emergency sessions could be required.
- Consider strategies for assisting students with the isolation some feel from the wider University due to their reliance on the Koori Centre, for example through mainstream lecture sit-ins, and notification of broader university events, festival days, etc.
• Utilise the positive feedback from students about the academic skills program in testimonials in order to promote attendance at these workshops.

The research indicates a number of opportunities that the Koori Centre should consider to assess relevance:
• Develop opportunities for social networking and peer support for postgraduate students
• Link students to assistance with computers/basic computer skills
• Provide information on children/parenting within the University
• Provide assistance to Indigenous students when enrolling.

Dr Philomena Renner
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