SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

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

Final Report

CULTURAL & INDIGENOUS RESEARCH CENTRE AUSTRALIA

APRIL 2011

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1. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 BACKGROUND
The Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA) was commissioned by Sydney University to conduct research with students and staff members in order to identify the barriers for Indigenous students in accessing Student Support Services (in particular the Counselling Service and Financial Assistance).

The aim of this research was to contribute to an improvement in Indigenous student retention rates and successful academic outcomes through identifying areas for improvement in cultural appropriateness in service delivery, as well as pointing out opportunities for enhancing the effectiveness of support available to Indigenous students.

1.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
The research for this project consisted of four discussion groups of current Indigenous students of Sydney University. Students were invited to participate via an email invitation from the Koori Centre. Groups were conducted between 31st May 2010 and 1st September 2010 as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Mode of Study</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>31/05/2010</td>
<td>Block (2nd &amp; 3rd year)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2/8/2010</td>
<td>Block (1st year)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>17/08/2010</td>
<td>Undergraduate Mainstream</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>01/09/2010</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>4 (6)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These participation rates represent 13.7% of self-identified undergraduate and 6.7% of postgraduate ATSI students enrolled at the university in 2010 (N=278).

In addition:

- * Two postgraduate students participated in the research via a telephone interview of approximately 30 minutes as the group discussion times conflicted with their commitments.
- A workshop was conducted with staff from the Koori Centre, Indigenous student representatives and staff from Student Support Services (1/12/10).
2. RESEARCH FINDINGS

2.1 CHALLENGES INDIGENOUS STUDENTS FACE

The research explored challenges students face, and these issues were explored among the different segments, including mainstream students, block students, and postgraduate students. While there were differences across the student groups, several challenges were identified consistently in the research. These include:

- Managing the high workload – This was a consistent theme in every group, and all students perceived the high workload as an aspect of university life that they found difficult to manage. This is clearly a concern for students regardless of the mode of study (block or mainstream), or the length of time at university. However, the research suggests that concerns with managing the workload were felt most intensely by block mode students. Block students identified the challenges when they return back to their communities, as they often felt overwhelmed, especially as they no longer had access to support staff and lecturers that are available during the block periods. However, it is worth noting that several block students also identified the pressure they felt when completing block because of the ‘full days' when on block. Mainstream students talked about feeling overwhelmed, especially at critical points when a range of assessments was due. For first-year students, there were concerns with the adjustment to university life that overwhelmed some students, especially when many were struggling to understand the course requirements and expectations. While managing the high workload was less of a concern for postgraduate students, the discussion did touch on this topic, and some students felt the pressure of the high workload with regards to higher expectations for academic writing. This had a different slant for these students, as they exhibited a higher level of confidence with regards to managing university commitments. It is important to note that given the extent of focus on high workloads, students also indicated the importance of being made aware of, and being encouraged to take on a reduced workload in the first semester (where relevant).

- Time management – This is related to perceptions of having a high workload, but it was clear in the discussions that many students struggled with time management, and did not feel equipped to effectively manage their university workload, family commitments, and other commitments and interruptions. As part of this discussion, procrastination and a drop in motivation were also identified as challenges many students face. Block students in particular noted that it is very difficult to maintain motivation and to avoid procrastination when they return to their communities.

“When you go back home you’re left floating.”

- Self doubt and feeling unfamiliar with a new learning environment – This was raised consistently in the research, and while this was of more relevance to first year students, even postgraduate students identified concerns they have with academic writing expectations, for example.

- Financial hardship – This was a consistent theme in all group discussions, as students found it very difficult to manage financially while studying at university.

- Family commitments – While this was a recurring theme, the extent of family commitments varied, with block students and postgraduate students more likely to raise this as a concern.
• Identity – this was an important theme in the group discussions, although it is important to note that the way this was articulated and the concerns raised varied considerably, reflecting the heterogeneity of the Indigenous student population. Several examples were given that illustrate the concerns students have:
  o One postgraduate student noted that there had not been an acknowledgement to country at a welcome dinner. This was felt to suggest that the University tends to operate under the assumption that there are no Indigenous students present. Other postgraduate students noted that comments by lecturers suggest that they assumed there were no Indigenous students in their class.
  o Students also noted that they do not always want to identify as Indigenous to their lecturers/tutors, because they did not want to be treated differently, and because there is an expectation that they will be asked to answer questions on behalf of Indigenous people, which they did not feel comfortable doing.
• Accommodation – finding affordable accommodation was identified as a considerable challenge for mainstream students.

There were a few issues that were of particular relevance to first-year students, and these no doubt reflect concerns experienced by all first-year students, regardless of cultural background. These include:
• Nervousness at starting university and being unfamiliar with the new learning environment. It is important to note that several students had moved away to attend university, so this is a key concern, as they are unfamiliar with Sydney, which some found daunting, especially if moving from a smaller town. For those who had moved away from home, there was a considerable amount of apprehension and fear, as well as homesickness.
• Logistics – First year students commented that initially it is very difficult finding classrooms, selecting subjects, and adjusting to university life. Older students also reflected on their experiences when they first started university. For block students, there was some confusion about where assignments are to be sent, and about the timetable.
• The need for assistance with enrolment was raised consistently (by first year students and by older students who reflected on their early days at university). There were requests for advice and support with regards to structuring degrees and unit choice, and this was especially the case for Arts students (e.g. what is a unit, how many are needed, at what level, difference between Table A major and Table B major?).

“I still think that was the hardest part, the mechanics of the whole thing. Like I know what I want to end up with but how the hell do I get there?”

A few specific issues were identified by postgraduate students including:
• Transitioning from block mode for their undergraduate degree to postgraduate studies.
• Transitioning from study at a different university.
• Assistance with services/policies regarding children on campus/parents on campus.
While several postgraduate students had completed their undergraduate degree at Sydney University, there were a few who had completed a degree at a different university, or who had completed their undergraduate degree through block mode. These students identified a number of challenges with adjusting to the new studying environment, with similar requests with regards to support as those identified by undergraduate students.

For **block students**, there were several additional challenges identified in the group discussions, on top of those already discussed:

- The block students that participated in the research were completing education degrees, so there was considerable discussion about the prac requirements of their degree. This was no doubt exacerbated by the timing of the research, which coincided with the time when prac placements were being organised. In both discussions, a considerable number of issues were raised with regards to prac, including:
  
  - Having to organise their own prac placements, and difficulties in doing this.
  - Disappointment with being rejected when applying for prac placements.
  - When on prac, being asked to provide lesson plans in a different format to those learnt at university.
  - Concern that a perception within the schools is that the Koori Centre or the degree they are completing is less professional. One student noted that the school had told her that the Koori Centre “takes away from the professionalism of the institution” as it was viewed as a “Mickey Mouse” or “Claytons” degree. Students also spoke of their frustration and feelings of disempowerment when they had been told by school staff not to tell people they are Indigenous, as they would then be viewed as “under the bar” academically.
  - Feeling that there are racist attitudes within the school environment, which were heightened as several students said that they were the only Indigenous person on staff.
  - Challenges coping financially as they were unable to work when completing their prac, which placed considerable financial burdens on the students, especially those with family commitments.

- In both discussions with block students, students noted that they are very familiar and comfortable with the Koori Centre, but that they feel removed from university life beyond this.

  “You feel like you go to the Koori Centre, you don’t feel like you go to Sydney Uni.”

This became a significant point for discussion, and students felt university culture beyond the Koori Centre was somewhat removed from their personal experience. Staff also noted that there is limited engagement by block students with the University outside the Koori Centre. While it could be argued the responsibility for this does not rest with student services, or the Koori Centre, it does highlight a significant barrier for accessing student support services – students who have limited contact with the University outside the Koori Centre are more likely to find it difficult to access student services that are clearly part of the wider University. This emphasises the importance of student services having clear links to the Koori Centre, and potentially other Indigenous organisations.
The research methodology included a **workshop with staff** from the Student Support Services and the Koori Centre, to discuss the findings from the research with students, and identify opportunities for improvement. When discussing the challenges identified by students, there was considerable discussion on the issue of identity:

- Staff confirmed the challenges students face with regards to identity within the university environment, and it was noted that among students accessing the Koori Centre, there were concerns that some students felt “less Aboriginal” than other students, and that this caused friction within the Koori Centre.
- Similarly, staff noted that often students will not identify as Indigenous with their lecturers, as they are concerned that they will receive different treatment as a result, and it was felt this was especially the case for Cadigal students. As well, it was felt that if a student is known to be Indigenous, it can be assumed that “they know everything about Indigenous people.”
- However, it is also worth noting that staff highlighted the need to take into account the diversity among the Indigenous student base, as “every student is a different story” and that their level of comfort with identifying as an Indigenous student varies.
- Staff also suggested that it might not necessarily be a concern if students do not want to identify.

The outcome of this discussion on identity suggested that there is a need to provide cultural awareness training among University staff, so that their level of understanding is enhanced, in order to limit the reservations students feel about identifying, if this is related to how they may be treated by University staff. In particular, it was felt this could be piloted in faculties that have a larger number of Indigenous students. Postgraduate students also identified the need for cultural awareness training among academic staff. This would inform staff of their cultural responsibilities, and the University policies and standards regarding this issue across faculties. It was also suggested that cultural awareness training would be beneficial for all Student Support Services staff.

It was noted that in the academic skills workshops conducted by the Koori Centre, students are exposed to cultural awareness training, and it was suggested that this training could be provided at the beginning of the year for staff from a range of faculties/areas.

The focus should be to conduct cultural awareness training with Student Support Services staff, and the teaching faculty (as a faculty with a large number of Indigenous students), and if this is successful, this could then be rolled out to other faculties within the University. It was also suggested that cultural awareness training could be conducted through learning solutions as part of the induction for all new staff.

One postgraduate student spoke of the approach at the University of Western Sydney with regards to cultural awareness of students. At this university, every student is exposed to Indigenous content as part of their degree, rather than having an Indigenous specific unit that is segregated. The student noted that this is part of the university agreement, and the approach was summarised as “for any degree to count at this university students must at some point within their degree, engage with Indigenous issues and/or knowledge”. It is noted that a commitment to increasing student exposure to and understanding of Indigenous culture is embedded in the University of Sydney’s 2011-2105 Strategic Plan.
Staff also highlighted the significance of issues related to financial pressures and time management. It was noted that Indigenous students might have financial difficulties because they do not know where their money goes (which is common for all students), and because some arrive at university with pre-existing financial issues. It was also noted that the eligibility criteria for financial support varies for diploma students and bachelor students, and that this presents challenges to students.

As well, when discussing the challenges identified by students in the research, staff noted that many of the challenges identified by Indigenous students are likely to reflect similar concerns raised by other students, and that there is no doubt considerable commonality with students across the board, regardless of cultural background.

### 2.2 EXISTING SUPPORT NETWORKS

A range of support services was identified, and there were some variations across the research. When asked about sources of support, the most common support identified was the Koori Centre and other students. These two sources of support generated considerable discussion. It is significant to note that there was almost no mention of the Counselling Service as a form of support for Indigenous students.

**Koori Centre**

Overall, student responses regarding the Koori Centre were positive. A number of benefits of the Koori Centre were identified:

- The Koori Centre was perceived to offer students a safe and insulated/protected environment, and it was seen to offer advice and support in a comfortable and safe environment.
- The Koori Centre helps students “find their feet”, especially by directing students to appropriate support services. Mainstream students especially identified the Koori Centre as an important referral point.
- For Block students, the Koori Centre was their primary source of support, beyond their peers.
- Postgraduate students noted that they used the Koori Centre as a place to re-energise, and to generate feelings of connectivity. Some of the students provided Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) mentoring, and this also assisted their sense of connection with the Koori Centre and Indigenous students.
- There were positive responses to the Academic skills program provided by the Koori Centre for Cadigal students, with a few students noting that this was helpful in providing information on what is expected and what services are available. Several students recalled information on financial assistance that was provided in this course, and one student also thought that the Counselling Service might have introduced the service. The research also suggests that the positive feedback from students about the program could be used as testimonials to promote attendance at these workshops. The discussion in the group with undergraduate students included Cadigal and non-Cadigal students, and results suggest that non-Cadigal students may have lower levels of awareness of support services available. Given a small number of students were included in the research, it is not possible to indicate whether these non-Cadigal students have fewer needs for
support than Cadigal students, however, it does suggest there is an opportunity to enhance communication with these students when they first start university to introduce student support services.

The research also identified a number of concerns raised by students with regards to the Koori Centre. Block students were concerned that reliance and interaction with the Koori Centre hampered their level of interaction with Sydney University more broadly, with students commenting that they feel like students of the Koori Centre rather than Sydney University students.

Postgraduate students also felt that there are sometimes misunderstandings with regards to what the Koori Centre can and cannot do, and that high (and perhaps unrealistic) expectations among students can lead to dissatisfaction with the Koori Centre. The feedback from the block students reinforces this response, as the discussions indicate that these students have high expectations with regards to the support the Koori Centre should be providing, especially for block students.

**Peer Support**

As mentioned above, peer support was important. Generally, students relied on other students from the Koori Centre, and within the block program, there was considerable reliance on other block students. Many block students commented that they feel comfortable in the block classes, and that students are less competitive and more willing to help each other in this environment. There was a sense that students tended to “sort it out between ourselves”.

Those on campus also noted that they receive support from other college residents.

Importantly, postgraduate students spoke of the informal peer mentoring/supportive role they play, given that they “survived” as an undergraduate. These students felt a sense of obligation to take on this role and share their knowledge with undergraduate students in the Koori Centre, and found this rewarding. However, they noted that they would benefit from peer support/mentors from other postgraduate students, not necessarily within their own department or area of study, as there were concerns the current approach can be draining and one sided.

Aside from the Koori Centre and peer support, a number of other support services were identified in the research, but to a lesser extent. These included:

- Support from the campus structure - It is worth noting however that this had both positive and negative components. Students appreciated the peer support provided, especially when they first started university. For example, a few students talked about the informal support provided by other college students who had been at the University longer, and that they helped them understand the layout of the University, how to use the library and other university processes. On the other hand, it was noted that college life is financially challenging, especially for those on partial scholarships. As well, a few students noted that college has its own culture, and that this poses challenges for some Indigenous students.
“You’re expected to form in this bond that is the college, and you have to put who you are and your culture aside in order to fit in, they treat you like a social outcast if you don’t integrate.”

- Financial Assistance – this was raised in most group discussions, and included ‘emergency assistance’ as well as ongoing scholarships.
- IT Assist.
- ITAS (Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme) – identified by block students.
- Block students felt lecturers and tutors were more approachable, and appreciated being able to contact course co-ordinators.
- Postgraduate students mentioned the postgraduate Student Representative Council (SRC) and the postgraduate arts research centre (PGARC) as useful services.

2.3 COUNSELLING SERVICE AWARENESS

As highlighted earlier, there was very limited awareness of the Counselling Service, but across the research there was acknowledgement, when prompted, that there would be a counselling service available through the University, as it was assumed all universities have a counselling service. There were only a couple of students who had contacted the Counselling Service, including one mainstream student and a couple of postgraduate students who had used the service once or twice as undergraduates.

Given limited awareness of and exposure to the Counselling Service, there was considerable uncertainty regarding the nature of the service:

- There was a general perception that there would be a long waiting list, so students would have to wait for an appointment/book in advance, which was not felt to be appropriate, as students felt that when in crisis they would need help immediately.
- Students were unsure whether the service is free.
- There was no awareness of the walk-in appointment service.

Awareness appeared to vary across the different student segments, although caution is needed given the small number of students included in the research. Nevertheless, the research suggests that non-Cadigal students have a lower level of awareness of student support services, and that postgraduate students have quite high levels of awareness (but limited access to) the Counselling Service. This excludes postgraduate students who have transitioned from Block mode or from another university, or students who have taken time off between their undergraduate and postgraduate studies.

“I could list all the support services the uni has but I don’t have any experience with using them.”

Student Support Services also offer workshops for students on a range of topics, and some postgraduate students were aware of these workshops, and while the topics were of relevance, they noted that it is not practical that they attend due to other commitments, especially during working hours.
When discussing the Counselling Service, and other student support services, it is clear that peers and the Koori Centre are the main source of information on support services. However, it is important to consider opportunities for enhancing the promotion of this service to increase awareness.

“Word of mouth is effective but it shouldn’t be your only means of getting information out there.”

### 2.4 BARRIERS TO ACCESSING STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

The research identified a number of barriers in accessing student support services. The most significant barriers identified in the research include:

- **Gaps in service knowledge** – While there was an assumption from most students that a counselling service would exist, there was limited awareness of the service with regards to location, contact details and services provided. For example, as mentioned earlier, there was limited awareness of being able to access walk-in appointments, and confusion among some students as to whether the service is free.

  “The support base that exists is good but it’s a matter of finding it and gaining access to it that’s the problem.”

- **Exclusion (perceived and actual)** – Responses suggest that some students felt the service was daunting to approach, and that the service excluded Indigenous students. In part this is a result of limited awareness of the service, but this view is also based on an association of the service with the wider University, from which some Indigenous students feel removed. This was more likely to be the case for block students and undergraduate Cadigal students.

- **Perceptions of inappropriate service provision** – Again, in part this barrier is based on limited awareness of the service attributes, but it is also based on an absence of service attributes that clearly indicate to students that the service caters for the needs of Indigenous students (such as Indigenous counsellors, or existing relationships with Indigenous organisations).

### 2.5 COUNSELLING SERVICE QUALITIES

The research explored preferences with regards to desirable attributes for a student counselling service. A number of criteria were identified, although as mentioned previously, there was a clear preference for immediate counselling when in crisis (block students especially noted this).

The research also acknowledged that the diversity among the Indigenous student population is an important consideration, and one that creates considerable challenges in developing service attributes that assist in this regard.

“People experience their Aboriginality in different ways.”
In discussing the attributes of the counsellors themselves, there was considerable discussion on the preference for Indigenous counsellors. Generally, there was a preference for Indigenous counsellors, for the following reasons:

- Given that ‘identity’ was raised consistently as an issue of relevance for students, the perception was that the service would not be able to assist with this, unless Indigenous counsellors were available.
- There was an assumption that an Indigenous counsellor would have a greater level of understanding – for example, students would not need to explain issues from scratch, such as how confronting it is to have a lecturer that is ignorant of Indigenous issues:

  “I understand that they’re [non-Indigenous counsellors] clinically trained to deal with these issues but they don’t know what I’m going through because they’ve never had to live in these shoes.”

  “Having a group of people who understand your frustrations.”

The types of issues that could be discussed with Indigenous counsellors included (but is not limited to) dealing with difficulties in identifying; isolation/homesickness; dealing with responses like “but your white”; dealing with questions from non-Indigenous students; community and identity related issues; concerns about resentment from other students about Indigenous specific bursaries and scholarships; isolation from community; and help by mediating between students and tutors/lecturers.

Postgraduate students also suggested Indigenous counsellors would have the added advantage of increasing the presence of Indigenous people on staff within the University.

“The only place you see Aboriginal academics or even staff on mass is in the Koori Centre, and then they’re just peppered throughout the rest of the uni.”

During the discussion on the appeal of Indigenous counsellors a number of concerns were also noted. One student suggested that it is not appropriate to assume that Indigenous status alone is an adequate selection criteria, and that care will need to be taken so that it is not assumed that being Indigenous makes the counsellor an expert on the range of issues that Indigenous students face. Students also identified a concern with confidentiality.

“It could be like a breach of privacy in that you feel what you say might not be kept confidential or that they’re somehow judging you.”

It was also suggested that students may feel intimidated/apprehensive if they know the counsellor, or know of the counsellor.

The research gathered feedback on the main attributes of counsellors that are important, and these include:

- An ability to understand and empathise with Indigenous perspectives. Councillors need to have a cultural understanding of the dynamics of Indigenous family, life and community in addition to awareness of the need for sensitivity in regards to certain issues such as a death in the community:
“Someone who will get the system that we live by.”

“Someone who would have the cultural nous on how to deal with different issues.”

- This understanding needs to be clearly communicated, as the common perception is that most university students have had a very easy life, with few struggles, and a similar judgement was made of non-Indigenous counsellors.
- This understanding could be enhanced through participation in cultural awareness training, and through connections with Indigenous organisations (e.g. AMS). One student noted that while the doctors at the AMS may not be Indigenous, they feel confident that the doctors understand Indigenous perspectives because of their links with the AMS.
- There was also a preference for being able to choose a male/female counsellor if relevant.

When discussing the Counselling Service, the research explored the relevance of the workshops provided by the service. Generally, the most common immediate response from students was that attending these workshops is difficult due to time restrictions and difficulties in scheduling, which was especially true for block students and postgraduate students. As well, postgraduate students requested greater relevance in the workshops, with requests for workshops specifically for Indigenous students, and/or for postgraduate students.

Indigenous specific web-based support was also discussed, but there was limited feedback gathered, so it is difficult to assess the demand for this based on the group discussions. However, some students felt web-based material is beneficial for administrative information, but less so for emotional support. There were some concerns from students that web-based material is not appropriate for support with regards to emotional health, as face-to-face support is more relevant. On the other hand, there were several students that appeared to be very confident accessing information on the web, so this could work for some students (especially postgraduate students who are often juggling work and university commitments).

### 2.6 FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Financial assistance was clearly a critical issue for Indigenous students, and most students felt financial hardship is one of the most significant issues in determining retention. Positively, the research suggests there were relatively high levels of awareness of financial assistance, scholarships and student loans. The main source of information on scholarships and financial assistance is the Koori Centre. A few also identified the academic skills workshops as a source of information on financial assistance, where representatives from financial assistance spoke. A few students were also aware that information on financial assistance was available on the website.

The key findings with regards to financial assistance include:

- There was some confusion with the difference between scholarships, loans and financial assistance (accruing debt).
- In the undergraduate mainstream group, most were aware of one-off financial assistance in a crisis, while a few learnt about this for the first time in the group. There was also a relatively high level of awareness of Indigenous scholarships.
• Those on campus struggled with partial scholarships.
• Block students noted that it was difficult to manage financially when on prac – there were requests for a meal, travel and clothing allowance when on prac.
• The eligibility criteria were difficult to understand for some, especially first year students.
• There was also some confusion regarding scholarship obligations. Staff also raised this as a significant concern, and felt more needed to be done to ensure students were aware of their obligations with regards to financial assistance.
• There was considerable interest from postgraduate students for information on scholarships, and some felt that this is difficult to obtain, especially for institutions outside Sydney University (although one student referred these students to a guidebook on postgraduate scholarships). The perception among postgraduate students was that most financial assistance caters for undergraduate students.
• There was interest in cadetships among the mainstream students because of on-the-job training and financial support this provides.
• Requests were made for assistance when completing application forms and submissions.

2.7 ELDERS ON CAMPUS

The majority of students did not feel it would be appropriate to have Elders at the University, as most felt that the support they needed most related to support in negotiating and managing aspects of university life, rather than cultural support. As well, given the diversity of communities and histories of the Indigenous student base, there was some concern as to how it would be possible to have Elders that students could relate to. Several students said that if they needed support from an Elder, they would seek out an Elder from their community. Some also felt it was not appropriate to access cultural support and information from a non-Indigenous institution.

“A white institution isn’t the place to learn about culture.”

The research suggests that having an Elder at the University may be of more relevance for students who do not have strong connections to their community. However, this could potentially be achieved by being able to provide referrals to an appropriate outside organisation with Indigenous knowledge and expertise.
3. IMPLICATIONS

The research identifies a number of opportunities for enhancing the level of support provided to Indigenous students, and this section identifies possible strategies for consideration. This is based on the feedback from both students and staff.

3.1 COUNSELLING SERVICE

The research identified the need to increase awareness of the Counselling Service among Indigenous students. Possible strategies to consider include:

- Enhance the links with the Koori Centre and the Counselling Service – students are likely to feel more comfortable if the service is referred by Koori Centre staff, or if the service is clearly linked to the Koori Centre.
- Include the Counselling Service in the presentations/workshops provided to students at the beginning of the year. It would also be good to include the Counselling Service and financial assistance during the housekeeping sessions for block students and as part of 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. It would also be worth considering developing a brief ‘cheat sheet’ or booklet for Indigenous students on services and support, with the Counselling Service identified (for example, ‘Important tips for passing’ or ‘The top 10 things you need to know’).
- Counselling Service to present information on their service to Koori Centre staff (for example, at a staff meeting) and during the orientation of new staff of the Koori Centre.
- The service could also be promoted through student ambassadors.

There was considerable discussion on the appropriate delivery of counselling services. Strategies to consider include:

- Indigenous counsellors - It is worth considering introducing an identified position, although the feasibility of this needs to be considered. It will also be important to review previous results when there was a counsellor based at the Koori Centre.
- Links/referrals with Indigenous organisations – Suggestions given in the research include links with an existing Indigenous mental health team, for example the team attached to the Royal Prince Alfred hospital, or links with an AMS. Investigating this option will also need to assess service requirements with regards to Indigenous status, as this may restrict some students from accessing the service. As well, given AMSs are usually over-loaded; it may not be realistic for an AMS to take on additional clients. If this is the case, it may be more appropriate to utilise the service that the AMS recommends, if relevant. Relationships are critical, as it will provide students with confidence that the counsellors have an appropriate level of cultural understanding. It will also be important that connections between staff at student services and the Koori Centre be established, so they can work together to assist students. This could also include inviting student services staff to social events including BBQs and trivia nights. It may also be worth developing links with the specific association of Indigenous psychologists, which is a pool of psychologists from a range of counselling services, as it may be possible to provide students with a link to people within their communities if relevant.
• Cultural awareness training of counsellors. This could also include a summary of the research findings, highlighting the main issues students were concerned with, including identity, time management, anxiety, and juggling family commitments and other concerns with university. Any promotion to Indigenous students should emphasise that the service can provide assistance in these areas.

• Having a student support and welfare role within the Koori Centre.

Promotion of the Counselling Service generated considerable discussion, especially among staff. A number of considerations were identified when discussing promotions targeting Indigenous students:

• Students were concerned they would not be able to see a counsellor immediately. It will be important to promote the walk-in appointment system, and also that you can fast track an appointment in an emergency. It is also important that staff at the Koori Centre are aware of the protocols with regards to emergencies so they can access the counsellors on behalf of the students, or encourage students to do so, in an emergency.

• A clear message in all promotion should be that the service is free.

• Promotion should also emphasise ‘confidentiality’.

• Providing a noticeboard in the common room and computer room at the Koori Centre that includes contact details for student support services and financial assistance would be beneficial.

When assessing the appropriate delivery of workshops, there was a clear preference for Indigenous-specific workshops, although it is difficult to assess the likely attendance rates at these workshops. It could be worth piloting an Indigenous specific workshop at the beginning of the academic year, or at the start of a 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).

“I would be more inclined to attend a session if I knew it was a class of Indigenous students.”

“This would be of benefit early in the academic year, to enhance awareness of and confidence in the service.”

“It doesn’t need to be constant, just one at the start of the semester to break down that initial barrier between students and support.”

Indigenous specific web-based support could be considered, although the research results do not clearly indicate a high level of demand for this, especially as some students suggested web-based material is beneficial for administrative information, but less so for emotional support (where face-to-face was felt to be more relevant). There was a sub-set of students that were very confident accessing information on the web, so this could work for this group, especially postgraduate students who are often juggling work and university commitments.

A number of other suggestions were identified in the research that should be considered:
• Consideration could be given to making the student services environment more friendly and welcoming, including a display of a statement about cultural competency and links with the Koori Centre.
• It would also be important that the Counselling Service have a copy of the block timetable, so they are aware that emergency sessions could be required.
• The Counselling Service could also look at opportunities for additional funding/grants in relation to supporting Indigenous students.

### 3.2 FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

A number of suggestions were given with regards to improving access to financial assistance for Indigenous students:

• Providing an allowance that assists block students when on prac, for example a meal, travel and clothing allowance. Mothers in particular emphasised the financial burden they feel when completing their prac requirements.
• Promoting postgraduate scholarship opportunities, including those that can be accessed outside Sydney University.
• Providing information on cadetships/traineeships.
• Offer financial literacy programs (through the ANZ or the Fred Hollows foundation) during orientation.
• Run workshops on financial assistance and scholarship options, but ensure this includes a discussion on the rights and responsibilities of students. It could also include a quiz or checklist that tests whether people are financially ready to study.
• Include information on financial assistance on the USB provided to block students at the end of the block sessions.
• When promoting the financial assistance service, it will be important to normalise the services, so that it is clear that it is a service that all students access, rather than a service for Indigenous students only, to limit stigma.

### 3.3 KOORI CENTRE

One of the issues raised in the research was the isolation students felt from the wider University due to their reliance on the Koori Centre. Consideration could be given to encouraging students to engage with the wider University, through strategies such as mainstream lecture sit-ins, and notification of broader University events, festival days, etc.

The research also suggests that the positive feedback from students about the academic skills program could be used to develop testimonials in order to promote attendance at these workshops.

It will also be important that any promotion of the Koori Centre clarifies what ‘they can and cannot do’. Postgraduate students felt that there can be a misunderstanding as to what support and assistance the Koori Centre can provide, and that high (and sometimes unrealistic) expectations among students can lead to dissatisfaction with the Koori Centre.
3.4 PEER SUPPORT
This is an important form of support for Indigenous students, so it is worth considering if there are opportunities to develop this further. For example:

- Providing peer support to postgraduate students from other postgraduate students.
- Providing social opportunities for networking with other Indigenous students, especially relevant for postgraduate students. This could include social and conference style events for postgraduate students (e.g. include an Indigenous speaker).

3.5 ADDITIONAL SUPPORT BEYOND STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES
Other areas of need identified in the research include:

- Assistance with computers/basic computer skills.
- Information on children/parenting within the University, including the policies and support available.

3.6 CULTURAL COMPETENCY
Although beyond the scope of this research, the research suggests there is a need for greater cultural awareness among University staff, including awareness among staff of their cultural responsibilities, and the standards and policies of the University. It was felt the level of cultural competency varied across faculties, as well as within the various faculties.

A number of suggestions were identified during the staff workshop, as follows:

- Develop a cultural competence online tool through student services, and also have this available through the Koori Centre website. This tool could also link in with the student union, and the SRC.
- Provide cultural awareness training to new University staff.
- Pilot a cultural awareness training program with the faculties that have higher numbers of Indigenous students (such as education), in order to develop this program over time.

3.7 STUDENT GROUPS
A number of implications were identified for the specific student segments included in the research, as follows:

First year students

- There is a need for a greater focus on orientation and transition strategies for students, so that they have realistic expectations, strategies for managing a high workload and are aware of the support available.
- It would be beneficial if Indigenous students had access to assistance when enrolling.
- It is important to note that given the extent of focus on high workloads, students also indicated that it would be beneficial if they were made aware of, and/or encouraged (where relevant), to take on a reduced workload in the first semester.
Block students

- Consideration should be given to what resources/assistance can be provided to assist block students when they return back to their communities in managing high workloads, a lack of motivation and procrastination. Some ideas given include:
  
  o Tutorials/active discussions online.
  
  o Providing information to block students with material that is sent out at the end of the block sessions on the USB. However, care will need to be taken to ensure that this resource is not overloaded with information, thereby decreasing the accessibility of this information.

- Providing access to prac supervisors or other assistance for block students during this period (including for set up and during prac placements).

- Some block students also suggested it would be helpful to have a workshop style information session on how to manage school/work/family commitments during block times as part of the timetable (but not during a lunch break).

Postgraduate students

- Postgraduate students also requested informal/social support, such as events/networking days or informal gatherings/social events where students have an opportunity to meet other Indigenous students, especially other postgraduate students, including those from other faculties.

- Offering additional journals/conferences/symposiums for postgraduate students on academic writing skills, and expectations of postgraduate study. This could also be offered through online resources (e.g. tips on academic writing, critical analysis, etc). Another example was providing a ‘thesis survival guide’.

- Need for support for postgraduates from other postgraduate students, as the research suggests that for some Indigenous postgraduate students, they provide support to undergraduate students, but do not necessarily receive support themselves.

- There is specific support needed for block students moving to mainstream postgraduate studies.
4. RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 COUNSELLING SERVICE

The following key recommendations are based on the research findings:

- 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
  - Review the feasibility of employing an Indigenous counsellor or having a counsellor 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.
4.2 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.

4.3 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.