

THETA

The Higher Education Technology Agenda

Creating institutional connections and a sense of belonging through cultural awareness and competence

The University of Wollongong, in its current strategic plan, set itself a goal of doubling the intake of Indigenous students by 2018. Evidence suggests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people are more likely to choose a higher education provider if they feel a sense of belonging to the institution. This belonging can be forged by promoting ATSI culture, heroes and values in relation to the institution (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew & Kelly, 2012). The organisational culture of a university also has a significant influence on the attractiveness of the institution to ATSI students (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew & Kelly, 2012). Additionally, raising awareness of ATSI culture among non-ATSI students and staff has been recognised as an extremely important endeavour of institutions and an obligation all universities should realize (Gunstone, 2008). Cultural programs and/or cultural competency training for university staff, students and researchers, has been identified as one of the most effective ways of encouraging cultural awareness and competence across the institution (Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011).

This presentation will report on a project instigated in the Faculty of Science, Medicine and Health (SMAH) at the University of Wollongong, that sought to establish a partnership with the local Aboriginal Corporation (IAC) and the university's Indigenous Centre (WIC) and through this relationship develop a mobile application that would lead individuals and groups through a self-guided cultural awareness tour of the University of Wollongong. The Mobile application guided tour, which uses GPS functionality, highlights Indigenous Australian culture, historical and geographical features and the connection of the local aboriginal Dharawal people to the 'Country' on which the University of Wollongong is situated. It also focuses on elements pertaining to the cultural safety and enhancement of belonging for ATSI students and community members. The intention was for the mobile application to be used with staff, students, indigenous people and community stakeholders including school and potential university students to showcase the University of Wollongong grounds and raise cultural awareness about Indigenous Australians.

Five separate guided walking tours (Trails) were developed through an iterative process that adopted a design based research methodology. Pilot and useability testing as well as ongoing formal evaluation guided the design evolution of the mobile application. Each of the five Trails featured four specific locations that mapped a path around the university grounds. The selection of each location featured in the five Trails, was purposefully chosen by a Steering Committee made up of representatives from the three project partners -SMAH, IAC and WIC as well as the University Facilities Management Division (FMD). The mobile application content associated with each station has been developed following extensive consultation with local indigenous community groups and indigenous academics from across the institution.

This innovative approach to cultural awareness-raising seeks to not only progress the strategic agenda of the university but also encourage the integration of inclusive teaching practices and behaviours of non-indigenous staff and academics and enhance the cultural safety of indigenous students and academics. The presentation will provide details of this higher education innovation and showcase how the five Trails and respective stations seek to promote indigenous students' belonging to the institution and raise awareness of ATSI culture among non-ATSI students and staff. The benefits and challenges encountered throughout the 3 stages of the project will be discussed as well as suggestions for how other institutions might approach and progress similar and related initiatives. Additionally, the presentation will highlight factors that were identified as having a significant impact on student experience and illuminate considerations for promoting positive student engagement. The presentation will also discuss some of the future plans for the advancement of the mobile application and further research that is being implemented.

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