Sharing experiences for change: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander online tertiary education

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The Moondani Toombadool Centre (MTC) was established at Swinburne University of Technology in 2018 and in early 2019 MTC conducted a multimethod research project to ascertain how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander online students were experiencing their tertiary education.

Concerned by the commonly adopted deficit discourse surrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at Australian universities, MTC wanted to conduct this research by talking with students directly about their experiences and challenges with online study. We focused on qualitative methods to approach students where they felt most comfortable to discuss their experiences and provided incentives to assist with participating students’ study costs.

The discussions with students focused on their preparedness for their degree, their experience of orientation, access to support and feelings of community (both virtual and actual). The research demonstrated the limited discourse about online Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, however, it was able to unpack the current ‘as is’ for Swinburne’s online Indigenous student cohort. This has provided critical insight, which has resulted in actionable developments to access and support, while providing the basis from which to begin embedding First Nations’ ways of being and knowing into online curriculum and course design.

These findings have helped to assist with shifting the dialogue about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ capacity, to contextualise the frameworks which operate around students throughout their tertiary journey rather than a simplified deficit approach. This research has assisted MTC to find its place within a student’s tertiary journey so that we can provide active support and engaging tertiary education communities. It has also critically provided a foundation of evidence on which to advocate for productive and culturally appropriate change within the online education space at Swinburne.

Learning outcomes

- How our online students interact with support
- What were the experiences of online students?
- What were the limitations of studying online?

Presenter

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Wiradjuri woman Ashlen Francisco works as a research officer at the Moondani Toombadool Centre at Swinburne University of Technology and is currently a PhD candidate at the Wollotuka Institute at the University of Newcastle. In her past experience, Ashlen had the opportunity to develop skills in research strategy and implementation within institutions such as the Kimberley Land Council, the Australian Human Rights Commission, the Koori Justice Unit in Victoria and the NSW Indigenous Justice Clearinghouse.