

'I feel like I've been able to create more awareness': What is it like for Indigenous men at top-ranked universities?

November 17 2023, by Garth Stahl, Braden Hill, Himanshu Gupta, James Smith and Samuel Moore



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One of the top priorities of the Universities Accord process is to improve

access to university in Australia, particularly for those from underrepresented groups.

This is particularly so for Indigenous men, who are among the least likely groups go to university, let alone an elite one. Elite universities are highly ranked, located in [metropolitan areas](#) and tend to have fewer students from disadvantaged backgrounds (as opposed to regional and lower-ranked universities).

As of 2019, [about 4.5%](#) of Indigenous men had gone to university. Indigenous women are nearly [twice as likely](#) to apply for an undergraduate degree.

As Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has [pointed out](#), there is "a greater chance of an Indigenous young male going to jail than university."

But while politicians talk about how they want to see more Indigenous people attend and graduate from university, we don't often hear from Indigenous students about their experiences.

Our study

We are a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers [studying](#) Indigenous men in higher [education](#). We [have interviewed](#) 19 Indigenous current and former students across Australia as part of our research.

[Understanding the experiences](#) of those who are making university work for them can help us understand how to make higher education a better option for other young Indigenous men.

Here [we focus on](#) four young men—Nullah, Dural, Ricky and Birrani—who were attending an elite Australian university.

Isolation and homesickness

Many Indigenous students [grow up in remote areas](#), which presents a geographical barrier to study. All Australia's top-ranked universities are in major cities. This means many Indigenous students have to move to go to university.

Nullah studied education, history and math. He told us he felt homesick during his studies:

"I just didn't know anyone getting down here. And it was pretty hard. I found it a lot easier to form relationships at the [Indigenous Support Unit]—more so than within my degree and in my classes."

Dural, who studied [clinical psychology](#), also spoke of feeling isolated in his studies: "there wasn't any Aboriginal people around at all. And I was like, yeah I didn't really sort of know why that was the case or like I said before, felt isolated."

Ignorance and racism

Interviewees also spoke about encountering ignorance and casual racism at university.

Ricky did an education degree, with a focus on drama and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. He found the Indigenous course he studied to be "watered down and it was so surface-level that it annoyed me."

He also spoke about how little his fellow students knew about Indigenous [culture](#). He gave the example of needing to explain to other students why another Indigenous student had not looked them in the eye. "I was like,

"Well, a lot of Indigenous people believe looking you in the eyes is a form of aggression. And out of respect, they won't look you in the eyes." They were like, "Oh, we didn't know that' [...]"

But Ricky told us casual racism was the "hardest thing": "I found it hard when we did education around Indigenous people and some of the casual racism. That was probably the hardest thing to deal with. And it's not so much like I think they were trying to be racist, but some of the stuff that they're saying, I was like, "Do you realize what you're saying right now?" Like do you understand?"

Passion for study and a desire to help

Despite feelings of isolation and racism, our interviewees spoke of their studies with great passion. As Birrani, who did an advanced science degree, explained: "I didn't really think of going to uni as an investment [in my future career] and all that kind of stuff. I just thought of it as doing what I want to do. I just wanted to do science."

Interviewees spoke about wanting to represent their culture and take their education back to their communities. Dural was highly motivated by what his education would allow him to do: "knowing that when you go to a psychologist, hoping that they're culturally sensitive and they can sort of understand your experiences as an Aboriginal person as well."

Nullah talked about showing people in his community that higher education was an option for them. "I always, I knew that I was capable of studying at uni. And I kind of wanted to also prove to the people in my own community and mostly I tell my brothers that it can be done."

Change is possible

Despite the issues with their institutions, our interviewees saw the university environment as malleable and something that could be improved. Ricky spoke about representing his culture at university. "Like, really my motivation to go to uni is to make sure that Indigenous people get the right education, but it's also about educating the educators to be able to educate in this topic."

Nullah similarly talked about helping to "embed" Indigenous perspective in classrooms. "I feel like that's my passion and that's my purpose, is having our people and our culture and our history represented more in the education curriculum and also to have that education there."

He added he wanted to influence how Indigenous culture was perceived at his university. "It's something I'm really passionate about like my background, my culture, and sort of getting that out across into the university."

Dural was he was the only Indigenous male in his psychology course. But he saw this in positive terms as an opportunity for change: "So in my cohort, I guess whenever those issues come up, or whenever anyone's wants to talk about psychology from more of an Aboriginal perspective, then I'm able to sort of share my knowledge and my experiences. And yeah, I feel like I've been able to sort of create more awareness around those issues, I guess."

A lot more to learn

Our research shows how young Indigenous men face significant barriers in their university studies. But it also shows how they approach their education with great passion, optimism and pride.

The interviewees told us how their strong sense of connection to culture and their identity inform how they navigate elite universities. They often

encountered experiences where they had to educate their fellow classmates who, according to them, had little familiarity with Indigenous cultures.

Policymakers have a lot to learn from students like Nullah, Dural, Ricky and Birrani, especially if we are going to ensure university is a place that genuinely welcomes and supports Indigenous men to study. Our research highlights the importance of taking culture seriously, and what is possible if Indigenous culture is acknowledged, affirmed and incorporated into [higher education](#) spaces and learning.

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