FIRST NATIONS FELLOWSHIP REPORT

Understanding the wellbeing needs of First Nations psychology students:

Identifying perspectives, needs, and strategies through the First Nations Psychology Student Wellbeing Research Project

Darren Garvey, Curtin University
2024 ACSES First Nations Fellow

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success acknowledges Indigenous peoples across Australia as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which the nation's campuses are situated. With a history spanning more than 60,000 years as the original educators, Indigenous peoples hold a unique place in our nation. We recognise the importance of their knowledge and culture, and reflect the principles of participation, equity, and cultural respect in our work. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and future, and consider it an honour to learn from our Indigenous colleagues, partners, and friends.

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And as always, to Beth, Ollie, and Elliot for being the reasons beyond myself.

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Abbreviations

ACSES	Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success
AHPRA	Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency
AIPA	Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association
AIPEP	Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Project
APAC	Australian Psychology Accreditation Council
APS	Australian Psychological Society
CI	Chief Investigator
EFTSL	Equivalent Full-Time Student Load
ERG	Expert Reference Group
HoDSPA	Heads of Departments and Schools of Psychology Association
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
PsyBA	Psychology Board of Australia

1. Executive summary

1.1 Report contents

This report describes the 2024 Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) First Nations Fellowship research study conducted by Dr Darren Garvey entitled "*Understanding the wellbeing needs of First Nations psychology students: Identifying perspectives, needs, and strategies through the First Nations Psychology Student Wellbeing Research Project"* ("the Project"). The Project sat at the confluence of questions related to First Nations psychology university student equity, wellbeing, and professional development, and was conducted to facilitate understandings of how First Nations psychology students' wellbeing is impacted during their university experience, in ways that influence their academic journeys. The Project contributes to the growing corpus of work relating to the educational and professional aspirations of First Nations students in psychology and aligns with research striving to understand and promote wellbeing for students as a basis for academic success and a university experience in which they flourish.

1.2 Downstream needs, upstream questions

> Having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander psychologists and culturally responsive clinicians are imperative to optimising culturally safe mental health care. Despite this, fewer than 1% of psychologists identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, substantially below population estimates (3.3%). Addressing this underrepresentation must be at the forefront of considerations if we are to meet the identified needs of people and communities. (Edwige et al., 2022)

Edwige et al.'s (2022) observation raises several important points regarding the paucity of First Nations psychologists in Australia. The lack of suitably qualified psychology graduates reflects the "downstream" consequences of efforts aimed at attracting and retaining students in the discipline. Concerns about professional workforce membership must understand the "upstream" circumstances and experiences of First Nations psychology students as they navigate the processes required to see them graduate and join the profession. Questions regarding the attraction, retention, and graduation of First Nations students from accredited psychology courses constitute an important focus in efforts to address Edwige et al.'s concerns.

Gilmore et al. (2025a) encourage research into the interconnections between university experiences and wellbeing. Despite increasing interest in the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students, relatively few qualitative studies have explored Australian university students' perspectives about which factors influence their wellbeing (Durmush et al., 2024). University student wellbeing policies and best practice should be informed by the lived experiences of university students as significant knowledge

holders in this endeavour (Durmush et al., 2021; Durmush et al., 2023). Ideally, this involves the examination of a wide range of variables to inform analyses (Dang et al., 2016; Hearn et al., 2019; Hearn & Kenna, 2021; Hutchings et al., 2019) through approaches that acknowledge the cruciality of the teaching and learning environment to supporting students' mental health and wellbeing (Baik et al., 2019).

1.3 Research design

The Project employed a qualitative research approach to draw on the experiences of current and former First Nations psychology students, along with the perspectives of university personnel involved in supporting their academic engagement. The Project framed university experience as an educational journey encapsulating the origins of initial interest in studying psychology, the transition into university, course experiences, and graduate reflections. Research yarning was employed to explore how wellbeing was associated with progression through these phases, and the impactful activities, interactions, and wellbeing opportunities that comprised favourable journeys. Insights into the experience of support provision were derived from those with direct involvement in assisting student academic progress and university experience, and/or those involved in the establishment and implementation of curriculum, policy, or infrastructure provided to assist First Nations' student retention. Data underwent causal layered and thematic analyses that revealed important wellbeing-related questions at the intersection of student experience and institutional social and structural settings (see Findings Part 1: Context and questions), and ways that they have been addressed in order to support student wellbeing as a cornerstone of their academic journeys (see Findings Part 2: Features and examples of wellbeing support).

1.4 Findings

Attending university represents an implicit wellbeing proposition for First Nations psychology students. Studying psychology at university places students in scenarios that impact the foundational elements of their wellbeing in various ways, requiring their thoughtful and creative navigation. Participants described experiences from which questions arose about:

- the cultural safety of university settings
- how well course content reflected the realities and needs of First Nations people
- the quality and availability of staff support
- whether financial, mental health, and other resources were available to help address basic needs.

These questions coalesced around five interwoven wellbeing-related themes that reflected demonstration of genuine positive regard for First Nations psychology students and the agency of students to exert influence on their academic journeys (see Table 1).

Table 1: Wellbeing-related themes supporting First Nations psychology students' academic journeys

Theme
1. Affirmations of place: Opportunities to connect and belong that facilitate connection and a sense of belonging within the university, psychology course, and professional settings.
2. Provision of core support: Opportunities to access resources, such as financial and scholarship assistance, housing, and other essential resources to meet basic needs that enable study/life balance.
3. Development of consequential agency: Opportunities to lead and influence academic experience through the identification and facilitation of individual needs, goals, and aspirations.
4. Participation in mindful interactions: Opportunities to develop meaningful collegial relationships that reflect attentive, respectful, and purposeful communication.
5. Displays of interest beyond the individual: Opportunities to dream, aspire, and reciprocate through the fulfilment of cultural obligation and enhancement of psychology's relevance to and practical application with First Nations peoples, families, and communities.

Genuine positive regard comprises the cultural basis of an academic ecosystem that acknowledges and supports good wellbeing as the default experience for First Nations psychology students as they navigate their academic journey. Genuine positive regard acknowledges First Nations students, while ensuring that this recognition does not impose additional responsibilities or burdens beyond standard academic expectations. Students should be supported in cultivating skills that foster their agency throughout their academic experience and enable them to increasingly recognise themselves as having a place within the profession. Assistance is provided based on students expressed needs and readiness to engage with it and tailored appropriately through respectful and considered dialogue. Genuine positive regard reflects integrated institutional practices, underpinned by policy, and realised through safe and purposeful engagement. Operationalising genuine positive regard should also enhance the confidence and capabilities of support personnel and others to do so, such that the benefits flow to both students and allies of this work.

First Nations psychology student wellbeing was supported in university and course settings when connection and belonging were facilitated; access to basic resources were available and accessible; self-determination was acknowledged and respected; collegial relationships were encouraged; and attention was placed not only on individual student progress, but also on how psychology communicated its regard for First Nations people within and outside of the profession. These qualities reflected an institution-wide approach, regulated through policies intended to enable accountability and provide a basis for evaluating aims and targets focusing on student wellbeing.

1.5 Recommendations

The Project identified an ongoing need to acknowledge, understand, and address the wellbeing needs of First Nations psychology students. This position is consistent with national and international research on university student wellbeing generally, and adjacent with investigations of wellbeing for First Nations students in other disciplines.

Recommendation 1: That mixed-methods, multi-perspectival research continue into understanding the nexus of wellbeing and university experience for First Nations psychology students.

- Approaches that acknowledge the interplay of students and settings should be supported in order to better understand university ecologies, course curricula, and teaching andragogy.
- Active engagement with First Nations student voices as experts in their lived experiences should be prioritised and facilitated safely and respectfully.
- Efforts to acknowledge and incorporate the perspectives of First Nations Elders and the expertise of First Nations organisations should be genuinely explored.
- The question “how is wellbeing supported to enable First Nations psychology students to flourish?” should be central to ongoing investigations into the development of psychology training.

Recommendation 2: That development of appropriate teaching andragogy be a central consideration in efforts to decolonise psychology curricula in ways that improve the inclusion, quality, and facilitation of First Nations content in psychology courses.

- Greater representation of First Nations content in course curricula should be accompanied by consideration of the means and methods by which it is facilitated for First Nations and non-Indigenous psychology students.

Recommendation 3: That virtual and physical classrooms and campuses prioritise principles of anti-racism and cultural safety as an expectation and guarantee for all students.

- These principles require consistent demonstration and reinforcement by staff at all levels of the university and within schools of psychology.
- Avenues to report concerns should be made explicit, along with the guarantee that “speaking up” about discriminatory or problematic behaviour does not jeopardise the student’s standing within their course or their university.

Recommendation 4: That efforts to promote psychology as an option for First Nations people describe pathways, expectations, duration, and core resource opportunities available to support First Nations students.

- Psychology training providers should consider, articulate, and promote their responses to the wellbeing-related questions identified in this project (see Figure 1).

- Psychology training providers should consider, articulate, and promote their responses to the elements of First Nations psychology student wellbeing (see Section 6).

Recommendation 5: That wellbeing support be acknowledged and explored as a source of practice-based evidence.

- Opportunities to develop the capacity and confidence of support personnel should be acknowledged, developed, supported, and promoted.
- Attention should be placed on counteracting scenarios in which First Nations psychology students' wellbeing is jeopardised due to their support for other First Nations students.

Recommendation 6: That resources enabling First Nations psychology students to remain enrolled in their course consider the "ripple effect" of that support as an argument for ongoing and improved investment.

- Explanation of how support for First Nations psychology students yields benefits beyond the individual should inform and address antagonistic discourse regarding equity-based and other measures highlighting First Nations psychology student needs.

2. Project background

2.1 Popular psychology

Psychology is a popular higher education study option in Australia that attracts students directly from high school, as well as people transitioning to a new career or engaging with higher education later in life. Psychology focuses on the complexities of human behaviour and the factors that contribute to individual and group processes and wellbeing. Students learn how psychological, social, and personality factors influence thinking and behaviour, as well as how interventions can be applied to help people lead more satisfying and meaningful lives (Australian Psychological Society, 2025).

Becoming a psychologist requires many years of intensive and specialised classroom and field-based training, overseen by appropriately qualified lecturers, supervisors, and mentors. Training content and quality is monitored according to an evolving set of guidelines aimed at ensuring the highest standards of psychological training, and, in turn, the best quality of psychological service for those who seek to access the services of Australian psychologists. Psychology students graduate with many critical and in-demand communication, writing, analytical, and critical thinking skills that can be applied in a variety of different fields, including but not limited to clinical psychology. Students may undertake advanced studies in psychology, further developing their understanding of more complex psychological processes and skills in psychological practice, as well as research, policy development, and organisational roles.

Psychology graduates intending to practice as psychologists must complete their studies in a course accredited by the Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC) and ensure ongoing registration with the Psychology Board of Australia (PsyBA), which is part of the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA). According to AHPRA's latest annual report (AHPRA & National Boards, 2024/2025), there were over 50,400 registered psychologists in Australia, representing an increase of 4.5% from the previous year. Registered psychologists overall constituted 5.3% of 959,838 AHPRA-registered health practitioners across 15 national health practitioner boards. Of these, 0.9%, or approximately 453 registered psychologists, identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. This was below the percentage registrations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander paramedics (2.2%) and nurses and midwives (1.5%), and on par or above memberships for professions such as optometry (0.2%), occupational therapy (0.7%), pharmacy (0.3%), physiotherapy (0.7%), and medical practitioners (0.6%).

2.2 Growing First Nations student numbers in psychology

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise 3.8% of the total Australian population and 2.4% of the domestic higher education population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). In 2021, the percentage of First Nations students enrolled in

undergraduate psychology courses in Australia was 1.8%, with the gap widening at the postgraduate level, where First Nations students comprised 0.97% and 1.35% of students enrolled in postgraduate coursework and research degrees, respectively (Australian Government Department of Education, Skills, and Employment, 2021).

Understanding the current state and aspirations for greater engagement by First Nations people with psychology necessarily requires knowledge of a complex and, at times, troubling history (Garvey et al.,2000), as well as more recent efforts to develop the profession as an attractive educational and professional proposition for Australian First Nations people. Australian psychology's contested history with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been well documented (Dudgeon et al., 2014; Garvey, 2007; Garvey et al., 2000; Kearney et al., 1973) and provides ample grounds to enquire into what is distinctive about the challenges facing First Nations students in psychology courses at Australian universities.

Interest in the profession may seem counterintuitive, considering the history of engagement between psychology and Indigenous people that has until recently seen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people positioned at arm's length from consideration in a profession that has regarded them more as antiquated curiosities or difficult subjects (Garvey, 2016). It is only within recent decades that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have become increasingly active and vocal agents in the processes of knowledge creation about us, and more than exhibits or the subjects of psychological enquiry against which more "evolved" and "civilised" examples of humanity were compared.

Momentum for change within the profession was spurred on by broader social milestones and specific Aboriginal health enquiries, including the Australian bicentenary (1988) and the release of the National Aboriginal Health Strategy (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party, 1989) and Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC, 1991). These events evoked a mix of celebratory acknowledgement of the Australian nation, tempered by a critical analysis of the health and wellbeing consequences of colonisation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This tension prompted closer examination of how psychology developed in Australia and its relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Central to these enquiries was the assertion that First Nations perspectives must foreground subsequent efforts to understand and address the aftermath of punitive and exclusionary practices.

Caution was immediately called for in response to this proposed shift. Initial scepticism arose over the validity and rigour of a proposed "Indigenous psychology" and calls for a "separate but equal psychology program for Aboriginal psychologists" were viewed as premature (Reser, 1993). Over time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, along with non-Indigenous allies in psychology, have spoken back to the establishment (Riley, 1997) and established a platform of influence within the profession (Dudgeon et al., 2000) through collective initiatives, such as the Australian Indigenous Psychologist's Association (AIPA), established in 2008.

Within this sociohistorical context, a focus on increasing student enrolments in courses and memberships within the profession offered a notable counterpoint to the ambivalence held by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people about the

profession and its practitioners (Ranzijn et al., 2007). Harris et al. (2012) asserted that achieving a proportional representation of Indigenous psychologists is important for the discipline because it would demonstrate that psychology has truly embraced Reconciliation and is serious about decentring from its traditional Western-privileged position. The benefits of enhanced engagement would not only flow towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but would also enable psychology to genuinely embrace truth-telling and collaboration, and to evolve as a discipline more responsive to culturally diverse Australian society, informed by the input and participation of different cultural groups.

The transition from “outsiders” to “insiders” within the profession (Garvey, 2007) continues, although the avenues to admission make such entry difficult for some, and supporting First Nations students to consider and enrol in psychology in the first place encounters many barriers (Harris et al., 2012). Stokes (2012) highlighted that Aboriginal students experience stress in the context of their psychology studies due to the unwanted and unappreciated attention of being pigeonholed as an “Aboriginal psychologist”. The impetus arose for psychology courses to provide safe and relevant learning experiences for Aboriginal students, with appropriate supports provided at different junctures in psychology degrees, such as smaller mentoring programs during larger undergraduate units.

Harris et al. (2012) examined the perspectives of prospective and former Indigenous psychology students, arriving at several key elements for the attraction and retention of First Nations psychology students. These included the establishment of settings that embodied cultural competence principles, relevant and relatable curriculum, partnership with local area health services, and involvement of local Elders and communities. Efforts to increase First Nations student numbers in psychology acknowledged that measures to enhance enrolment must start early and prior to attendance at university. Harris et al. concluded that more comprehensive research incorporating input from Indigenous people was required to inform initiatives aimed at growing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander psychology students.

For Stokes (2012), cultivation of a two-way flow of knowledge and respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people was the goal, including but not confined to promoting the cultural competence of non-Indigenous staff and students. Greater Indigenous representation in the curriculum and the classroom was viewed as an important way to increase the relevance of courses beyond exclusively mainstream or “Western” models of psychology. Such changes required staff training aimed at improving cultural competency, as well as genuine efforts to establish and build relationships with Indigenous communities and organisations as foundational steps. So too was consideration of the way courses were delivered, particularly for students needing to study at a distance, or for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people currently working in related fields who were considering transitioning into psychology.

A concerted effort to understand and address the needs of First Nations psychology students was commenced in 2013 through the Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Project (AIPEP; Selkirk et al., 2025a). The AIPEP was developed by Professor Pat Dudgeon and a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and advocates in recognition of psychology’s vital role and responsibilities in addressing the

mental health needs of First Nations peoples, and the exclusion of Indigenous knowledges and participation in the profession. The AIPEP proposed that addressing this inequity would help build a cohort of qualified and culturally safe practitioners, invested in addressing the social and emotional wellbeing and mental health needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities.

A core aim of the AIPEP was to address the severe underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in psychology to increase the recruitment, retention, and graduation of First Nations students in psychology degrees. The initial project ran until 2016 and produced a set of guidelines for increasing the recruitment, retention, and graduation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander psychology students in accredited undergraduate and postgraduate psychology programs (Dudgeon et al., 2016). The AIPEP guidelines provided critical guidance for universities and largely focused on organisational reform to improve student experience and success, including:

- the need to build engagement with organisations and growing community partnerships
- the demonstration of organisational leadership, leading to an enabling culture
- support and development of formal and informal mentors and role models
- provision of quality tutoring, academic support, scholarships, and financial assistance
- development of meaningful and ongoing curriculum and pedagogy
- building two-way community and family links and culturally safe and supportive peer networks
- fostering Indigenous education centre relationships
- conducting outreach and school visits that promote enabling and bridging program accessibility
- validation and encouragement of alternative entry pathways, quotas, and designated places.

Bond et al. (2017) reported that, from 2010 to 2015, there was a small yet significant increase in the number of Indigenous students in undergraduate psychology courses, improving from 1% of total Equivalent Full-Time Student Load (EFTSL) in 2010 to 1.3% in 2015. For the same period, the Indigenous EFTSL in postgraduate coursework and research programs remained constant but grew in line with the overall load of all psychology students in postgraduate coursework and postgraduate research. Bond et al. acknowledged that the audit of enrolments looked “pretty disheartening”; however, they noted that a modest overall increase to 3% represented an achievable target, if collectively pursued across the psychology training institutions across Australia at that time.

The AIPEP was revived in December 2020, with the goal of continuing to implement the findings of the original project through building a national community of practice to empower university psychology educators to transform their curricula by providing a suite of resources to support this goal and undertaking research to identify opportunities to improve curricula to better meet the needs of First Nations students. The AIPEP drew support from important stakeholders, including the Australian Psychological Society (APS) and 34 partner universities/higher education providers. First Nations governance was provided by the AIPA members and Indigenous advisors. The ongoing support for

the AIPEP demonstrated psychology's appetite to continue meaningfully engaging with the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including those of students seeking to join its ranks.

Selkirk et al. (2025a) outlined the imperative to decolonise tertiary psychology student support in Australia. Central to this priority is the focus on epistemic justice for Indigenous knowledges and the provision of culturally appropriate services that enhance the recruitment, retention, and graduation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander psychology students. Accordingly, multipronged and multilayered initiatives to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander psychology students need to target:

- policy and structural support
- partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, organisations, and departments
- research and placement support
- processes supporting cultural safety.

However, a research gap was that the study surveyed educators only and did not directly seek the perspectives of First Nations psychology students. Selkirk et al. (2025b) urged ongoing research of the psychology-specific barriers, social and emotional wellbeing factors, and lived experiences relating to psychology education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as priorities to augment the decolonial turn, with psychology student support. The aspirational goals of equity-related initiatives aimed at increasing the number of First Nations university students reinforce the need for such research. Isaacs-Guthridge (2024) argued for privileging of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student voices and engaging with their lived experiences, as this invites opportunities to question mainstream practice, reject colonial narratives, and reimagine the future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Improved understanding will play a role in ensuring the successful progression of students through their courses and enhance the likelihood of a good return on investment for the resources issued in such initiatives.

2.3 Exploring the role of wellbeing in higher education journeys

Wellbeing is a comprehensive and multifaceted concept, described by the World Health Organization (1995) as "an individual's perception of their position in life within the context of the culture and value systems in which they reside, and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns". This perception is shaped by the psychological, social, and physical resources available to individuals as they act to address, maintain, or improve their position in context. Wellbeing can be understood as an experience actively shaped by individuals through their thoughts and behaviours, situated within specific social and environmental contexts (World Health Organization, 1986). Wellbeing is influenced by numerous factors, such as personal experiences, beliefs, and values. It encompasses, yet extends beyond, physical health or the absence of illness. Wellbeing is experienced and navigated in physical and social settings, and

people can be active in managing their wellbeing, considerate of the characteristics of those contexts.

A “settings approach” to understanding mental health views wellbeing and distress as outcomes of the interaction between individuals’ personal resources and the positive experiences or stressors present in their environments. Effective engagement with social and environmental systems reflects an equilibrium between demands and resources that promotes balance and wellbeing that serves as a resource for living and an indicator of overall life quality. Its interpretation may vary according to individual perceptions of which elements are significant for wellbeing and how people in turn construct their experience. The same factor may be similarly or differently meaningful for the wellbeing of different people.

Models of First Nations wellbeing emphasise the importance of harmonious and healthy connections between several domains: body, mind, and emotions; family and kinship; community; culture; Country and spirituality—situated within the broader ecological context of the determinants of health (for example, Dudgeon et al., 2017; Gee et al., 2014). Cultural ways of knowing, being, and doing acknowledge the role of historical, social, and political determinants of health in affecting the integrity and connection of these domains across individuals, time, and place. Wellbeing reflects the capacity to fulfil culturally important obligations and to pursue self-determination and autonomy, aimed at ensuring cultural continuity and the contemporary representation of traditional culture (Arabena, 2020). Garvey et al. (2021a) identified five foundational elements of wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults that emphasise the importance of belonging and connection, holistic health, expression of purpose and control, experience of dignity and respect, and fulfilment of basic needs. These elements, interwoven by the influence of family, community, and culture, form what Garvey et al. (2021b) conceptualised as the fabric of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing.

Research focusing on the wellbeing of First Nations adults in Australia underscores the significance of relationality and interconnectedness between individuals, communities, culture, and Country. Wellbeing is understood as arising from, and maintained by, strong connections and the integrity of relationships encompassing family, community, culture, and Country. Exploration of First Nations wellbeing urges consideration of the whole over isolated parts, reflecting collectivist values and support for group interests. A settings approach to understanding First Nations psychology students’ experience should not only consider discrete features but also consider the ways in which the integrity of significant elements is integrated, experienced, and supported.

2.4 Wellbeing and First Nations student university experience

Recent efforts have begun to address the paucity of research examining the nexus of wellbeing and First Nations university student experience. Durmush et al. (2023) investigated the perspectives of Indigenous university students regarding solutions and strategies to enhance their wellbeing in higher education. Students identified the value of inclusive and supportive Indigenous support units targeting wellbeing; financial

scholarship support; the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives and culture within the institution; employing more Indigenous academics and Indigenous staff; Reconciliation Action Plans; Indigenous student role models; reviewing higher education institutions' policies; revising higher education institutions' response to Aboriginality; mandatory cultural competency training for staff and students; and support services, including counsellors.

Cage et al. (2021) identified that the transition-related experiences of students into, during, and out of university are an important way to conceptualise the long process of the university experience. Their work examined student perspectives of perceived challenges involved with transitioning, or navigated periods of change into, during, and out of university, and their perceptions of what support would be beneficial for those transitions. Many Indigenous students face challenges when attending university, including navigating mainstream culture as a minority and feeling isolated. Those with strong cultural ties may struggle with relationships and protocols in unfamiliar settings, making it difficult to connect with other students, or, as first-in-family university attendees, they may have few Indigenous role models or mentors, especially in psychology. Together, these factors make the transition to university particularly difficult (Harris et al., 2012) and an important focus for research (Gale & Parker, 2014).

Durmush et al. (2021) provided an important caveat to their work on student wellbeing. They advised that some of the determinants may act as both drivers and barriers to wellbeing, noting that family and kinship can provide an important and supportive backdrop for academic engagement, or act as a barrier to that engagement—for example, if students are discouraged from participating. This observation urges consideration of the individual journeys and circumstances of university students and conscious reflection on the assumptions that may be held about particular influences, that "one size fits all", or that one factor necessarily has a positive association with wellbeing for all First Nations students. Efforts to understand which elements support and promote the wellbeing of First Nations psychology students must allow consideration of important nuances in our analyses.

Gilmore et al. (2025b) prioritised the need to extend wellbeing research to focus on how university-specific factors influence wellbeing by investing greater attention into the elements of university life that cause or ameliorate academic stress. Enhanced clarity of these factors has the dual benefits of informing appropriate and specific targets for university wellbeing intervention and associated university policy and cultural reform. Arguably, these comprise not only physical university structures, such as campuses and classrooms, but also the increasingly virtual landscapes created to deliver educational experiences across the array of university courses. This project sits well within this important research agenda.

2.5 Stakeholder collaboration and industry impact

This project aligned with other initiatives aimed at addressing the relative dearth of First Nations psychologists by better understanding how a wellbeing focus enhances the

quality of university experience in ways that support the retention and graduation of First Nations students from such courses. Guidance provided by industry leaders and First Nations-led groups in the field refined the project focus and helped ensure that the translation of the project findings provide recommendations meaningful to significant players in the psychology arena. The Project has specific relevance to the goal of growing the First Nations psychology workforce and support for higher education providers committed to this endeavour. These initiatives are timely within a period of professional reflection on how psychology can continue its reconciliatory journey with First Nations people and transform these intentions into action. The findings emerge during the release of revised APAC accreditation standards for psychology training in Australia (Australian Psychology Accreditation Council, 2025) that highlight the need for action regarding the integration of diversity and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the training that psychologists receive. Research that examines the relationships between wellbeing and university-specific factors is likely to be of specific relevance to university policy makers (Gilmore et al., 2025b).

2.6 Research aims

First Nations psychologists comprise an important professional cohort in efforts to address wide-ranging psychological health concerns and have the potential to guide and catalyse mental health and social and emotional wellbeing initiatives for the betterment of individuals, families, and communities. First Nations psychologists are uniquely positioned to provide safe and appropriate services for Indigenous peoples and, through leadership in the profession, inform and influence the capacity of all Australian psychologists in culturally safe practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

How best to support student engagement and success at university is an enduring question faced across the global higher education sector. The question has particular significance regarding the attraction, retention, and graduation of students who have typically been excluded from university participation. This project explored the experiences of First Nations psychology students, aiming to understand how “wellbeing” within university contexts supports their academic success and experience in these settings. There were three primary aims associated with the question (see Table 2).

Table 2: First Nations Psychology Student Wellbeing Research Project aims

Aim	Description	Outcomes
1	To explore former and current First Nations psychology student perspectives on wellbeing and university experience.	An examination of how wellbeing is viewed in the educational experience of First Nations psychology students.
2	To examine the relationship between wellbeing and course completion from the perspective of First Nations psychology students, graduates, and support personnel.	Detailed insights into the intersection of wellbeing and academic experience from multiple perspectives and various points in time.
3	To gather practice-based evidence of how supporting First Nations psychology student wellbeing facilitates course completion.	Exposition of a range of strategies and examples of positive wellbeing interactions and activities.

The Project foregrounded the voices and perspectives of current and former First Nations psychology students in this endeavour and acknowledged the roles that support personnel play in these students' academic trajectories. The insights obtained provide important practice-based evidence for resources that equip students to navigate and flourish in their academic journeys and support the efforts of those working to assist First Nations psychology students to do so.

3. Research design

3.1 Methodology

The Project employed a qualitative research approach to draw on the perspectives and experiences of current and former First Nations psychology students, and university personnel involved in supporting these students' academic journeys. The Project framed the university experience as a journey encapsulating the origins of initial interest around studying psychology, the transition into university, course experiences, and graduate reflections. The Project was guided by Indigenist and transformative research methodologies that view Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives as meaningful and important as the basis for systemic change. Transformative research looks to transform the practice of research for its own sake by requiring it to engage in changing aspects of a status quo deemed unsatisfactory (Mertens, 2007). Understanding First Nations psychology students' experience in their university contexts is an important way of privileging student perspectives about the qualities of those settings.

A priority for the Project was that it be conducted in a manner that achieved more than merely describing problems or noting deficits in student capabilities or institutional settings. Understanding these comprises one part of a picture that contextualises the perspectives, needs, and strategies for First Nations psychology students' wellbeing. Increasingly, caution is urged in conceptualising the problems encountered by First Nations students as evidence of problematic students. Indigenous peoples are not the problems that need fixing (Anderson et al., 2022). This change in perspective reflects a broader paradigm shift, inviting a strengths-based approach that acknowledges resourcefulness, ingenuity, and agency, over a deficit-focused model that tends to promote and reinforce negative assertions about circumstance and student capability. Thus, examples and instances of settings and experiences that support the wellbeing and academic progress of First Nations psychology students were sought and acknowledged as a priority.

3.2 Researcher positioning

In qualitative research and research addressing First Nations' interests, it is customary that the researcher provides an account of their position, including details of their background, experience, and interests that are relevant to understanding their approach to the work (Charmaz, 2008; Nakata, 2007). This project continues my longstanding involvement in the fields of Indigenous psychology and university education, and the ongoing desire to support the current and future generations of First Nations psychology students. My own enrolment in psychology was neither direct nor planned. As the first in my family to attend university, I had originally enrolled in an education degree, with aspirations of becoming a high school art teacher. However, a first-year psychology elective unit sparked my interest, and, in my second year at university, I amended my enrolment to the Bachelor of Psychology degree. I was not the best or most gifted

student, but I persevered and adapted to the demands of the course and the broader university experience, away from home, but never far from home. I recall making good friends, without whose support and camaraderie I would not have progressed. After four years, I became one of the first Indigenous people to graduate with a Bachelor of Psychology degree in Australia, and, as I was later informed, the first to do so from James Cook University.

I entered the workforce at a time of upheaval in the mental health industry. Activity and organisation around the social and emotional wellbeing and health status of First Nations people was increasingly responsive to the legacies of colonial interventions. Ongoing trauma spurred gatherings, writings, and protests that highlighted the need for serious acknowledgement and serious action to better address the historical and contemporary circumstances of First Nations peoples in Australia. Moving from a position in community mental health in North Queensland to a teaching role at Curtin University in Perth in 1996, I contributed to the development and delivery of the Counselling and Mental Health Specialisation of the Bachelor of Applied Science—a groundbreaking course created in response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC, 1991), and the desire of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to address and direct the social and emotional wellbeing needs of people in their communities.

Over the following three decades, I have worked with, taught, and listened to students and professionals in this field, and I was able to consolidate my ideas and the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through my PhD research, as well as other publications and presentations. Over time, I have heard the same and different questions and concerns expressed about changes within the profession regarding First Nations people and First Nations matters. Inspired by my longstanding involvement working with First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous allies, this project represented a way for me to incorporate my recent work in the field of wellbeing with an endeavour aimed at supporting the growth of a professional cohort and profession that has played such a large part in my own life, and that has the potential to be a positive force in the lives of other First Nations people.

3.3 Participants

Participants able to provide informed perspectives were purposively selected (Patton, 1990; Polkinghorne, 2005) and comprised currently enrolled First Nations psychology students, First Nations psychology graduates who had completed their psychology studies, and support personnel with experience and interest in working to support the progress of First Nations psychology students. Potential participants were identified by the Chief Investigator (CI), complemented by the AIPA and AIPEP networks. A snowballing process emerged during recruitment, as several participants approached the CI after they had been encouraged to apply by other participants.

Research yarns were conducted with 25 participants, comprising 10 currently enrolled First Nations psychology students, six First Nations psychology graduates, and nine university personnel involved in different facets of student support (see Table 3). All participants were over 18 years of age at the time of participation, and each was

provided with a gift voucher in appreciation for their time, consideration, and contribution to the Project.

Table 3: Participant details

Status	N	Gender	Cohort details
Currently enrolled students	10	Male: 2 Female: 8	*Course level:* Undergrad (n): 3 Postgrad (n): 7 - Master's: 2 - PhD: 4 - Combined master's/PhD: 1
Graduates	6	Male: 2 Female: 4	*Qualification level:* PhD: 4 Master's: 2
Non-Indigenous support personnel	9	Male: 2 Female: 7	Support personnel comprised university staff involved in various roles, including lecturing, tutoring, unit and course control, and postgraduate supervision.

Current student and graduate perspectives were drawn from undergraduate and postgraduate course experience at 12 Australian universities (Queensland: four; Western Australia: four; Victoria: three; New South Wales: one). Several participants noted that they had studied psychology at more than one institution and/or had studied other courses at university prior to pursuing psychology. Perspectives were obtained from students ranging from those currently enrolled in their undergraduate first year to those on the cusp of completing their postgraduate degrees. Graduate perspectives were provided by participants recently graduated from their courses, and from those with experience of studying psychology at university close to three decades prior.

Yarns were also conducted with nine non-Indigenous university staff who were either directly or indirectly involved in supporting the academic progress of First Nations psychology students. Their roles encompassed in-person involvement with students, such as tutoring, lecturing, mentoring, and research supervision, or policy, managerial, and leadership tasks regarding issues pertinent to First Nations psychology students and broader university matters. Support personnel spoke of their long-term or more recent experiences in the field and of changes and challenges encountered in becoming good allies for First Nations psychology students. During the research yarns, several First Nations psychology students and graduates described how they also engaged in supporting their First Nations peers as an expression of cultural responsibility and connection in the push for collective achievement. Consequently, support experience insights and practice-based examples were obtained from First Nations participants, as well as their non-Indigenous allies.

3.4 Data collection

3.4.1 Research yarning

The research engaged participants in semi-structured wellbeing research yarns. Research yarning has been recognised as a culturally grounded way of engaging with and conducting enquiry into issues and experiences that concern Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including health, wellbeing, and education (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Engaging in yarning can increase participants' experience of cultural safety in the research process, encouraging greater depth and detail with their perspectives.

A description of the questions was provided to participants prior to the commencement of the research yarn in order to demonstrate transparency in the research approach and to give participants the opportunity to prepare their thoughts. Participants were asked open-ended questions related to wellbeing, university, and studying psychology, and follow-up questions were posed based on their responses to those. The yarning process was organic and exploratory, following lines of enquiry along participant-identified issues, as well as speculative considerations of their aspirations, questions, and feelings.

A semi-structured yarning approach was also employed with non-Indigenous participants. The approach facilitated personable and authentic interaction between the researcher and participants, enabling deep consideration of the matters raised by support personnel not only about what they did, but also about what being involved in supporting First Nations psychology students required of them intellectually and emotionally. Non-Indigenous support personnel offered insights into what they had found to succeed in their efforts to support students and were vulnerable in recounting their doubts and hesitancies in that pursuit. Audio recordings of the research yarns were transcribed for analysis. Participants were provided with a copy of their yarn transcript and invited to check and amend for accuracy.

3.4.2 Data analysis

The qualitative yarning data underwent thematic (for example, Braun & Clarke, 2006) and causal layered analyses (CLA; Inayatullah, 1998, 2004). Themes were developed through iterative and collaborative consideration of what participants spoke of as the wellbeing needs and experiences of First Nations psychology students. Participants reviewed the CI's initial impressions of the data and shared these reflections with the researcher during and following the research yarn to guide the researcher's interpretations and address discrepancies or inaccuracies. A second round of member checking was conducted when the researcher returned the participant transcript and draft findings to participants to check. Claims made by the CI were amended or refined to ensure that they accurately reflected the meaning and intent expressed by participants. An Expert Reference Group (ERG) contributed an additional layer of analysis oversight for the CI (see Section 3.4.3: Project governance).

As an analytic process, CLA directs that attention be devoted to how phenomena of interest are constructed and understood over time. CLA encourages consideration of the

litany or surface description of phenomena of interest, and how they are explained. The litany reflects the most apparent or surface-level understanding of social phenomena. CLA addresses discursive explanations of surface-level phenomena, wherein interest focuses on the way phenomena are communicated and the worldviews that privilege particular perspectives. CLA also encourages attention to the metaphors and stories employed to validate and justify specific actions, and how these provide the unseen yet important foundations of what we understand and observe.

CLA is also located within a field of enquiry referred to as Critical Futures Research. Here, the interest is to imagine and propose preferable future scenarios based on what contemporary and historical perspectives tell us about stakeholders, policies, and institutions. The capacity to encourage forward-looking possibilities is central to present-day equity work, wherein efforts are made to conceptualise, direct, and operationalise equity within changing sociopolitical environments. The resulting multifaceted understanding presents examples of questions held by First Nations psychology students about the prospect of their studying at university; qualities and features of student agency; institutional settings that support good wellbeing during students' academic journeys; and nuanced practice-based examples of good work from the experiences of First Nations psychology students, reflections of previous graduates, and the role-based realities of support personnel.

3.4.3 Project governance

An ERG comprising researchers, practitioners, and students within the fields of psychology and higher education provided additional guidance for the research. Their involvement helped ensure alignment of the Project with the adjacent work of the AIPEP, and that recommendations were considerate of other important developments in the field, such as the revised APAC accreditation standards (2025). The ERG provided oversight on the data analysis, encouraging CI reflection on participant perspectives. The ERG acted as an important sounding board for the CI and provided honest feedback and genuine encouragement during the data collection, analysis, and writing phases.

3.4.4 Ethics approvals

Ethics approvals were obtained from the West Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee (Approval Number HREC 1398) and Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number HRE 2025-0226). All knowledge holders provided their informed consent and retained the right to withdraw from participation at any time and remain anonymous in the reporting of their experiences.

4. Findings Part 1: Context and questions

> I would say that because of the support that I got from the [Aboriginal Unit], as in the support of being able to talk to someone and then the support of my tutoring and then just the support of the actual environment, the staff and then the actual unit that they have there. I don't know how to describe it, but it's a really nice unit. I think all of those definitely interplayed into supporting me to stay at uni, 100%. (Student interview 7)

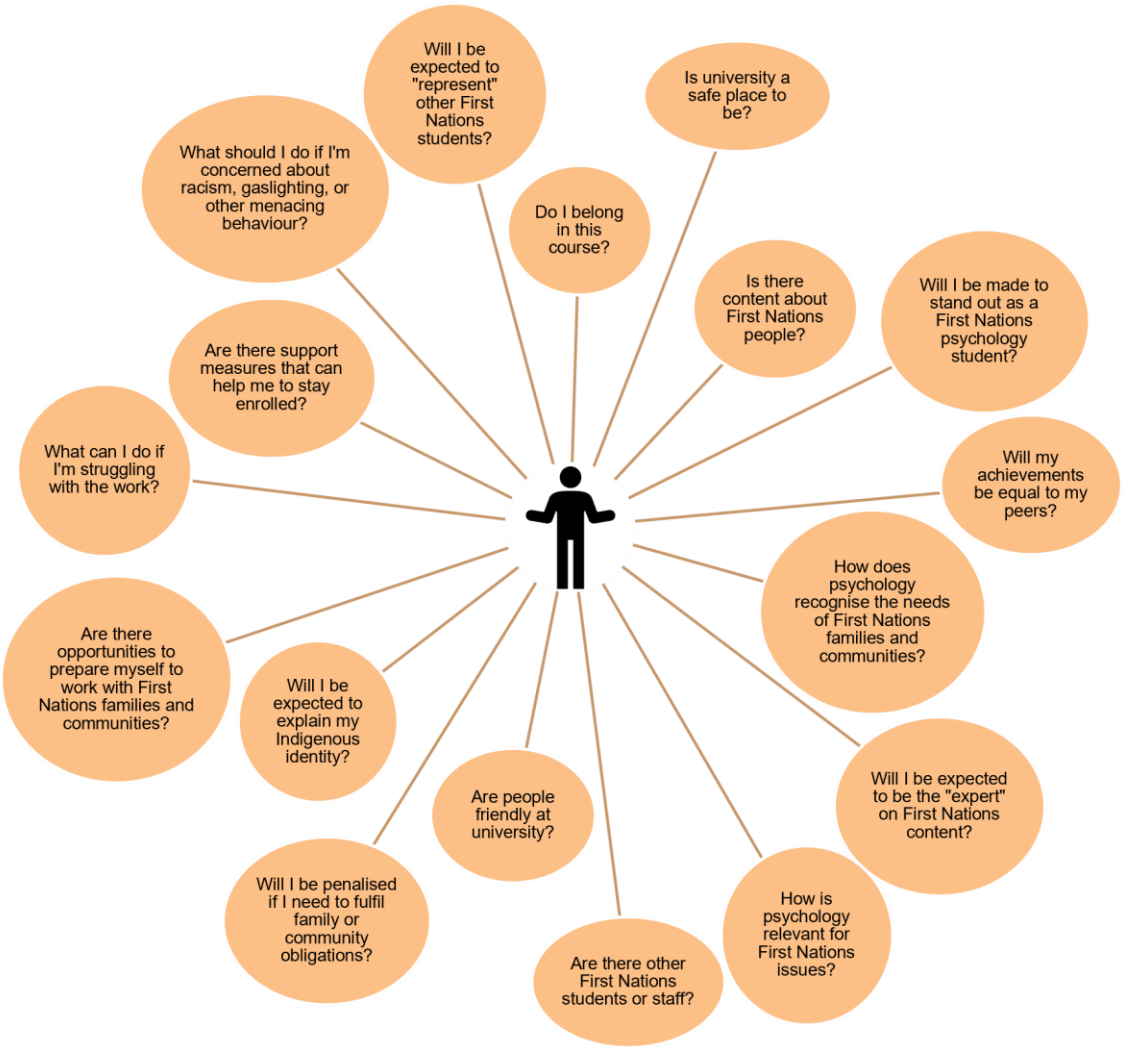
Findings Part 1 elaborates on the conditions and experiences that underpin the wellbeing-related questions students found important as they considered their enrolment, retention, and graduation from their chosen courses. Findings Part 2 elaborates on the practice-based examples of strategies and actions that addressed these questions.

4.1 Unpacking wellbeing perspectives, needs, and strategies

Although described by many participants as a challenging course of study, there was no suggestion that psychology courses be made easier, or that special concessions be made for First Nations students. Rather, First Nations psychology students sought to be supported to participate in their academic journey safely, with calls made for better representation in content, consideration of teaching andragogy, and mindful support opportunities that would enable them to engage with the material and pursue their aspirations. Opportunities for additional support were appreciated and provided valuable assistance that enabled students to balance the demands of university and personal commitments. Financial support reduced this source of stress and helped lessen the cumulative burden that many students reported. While appreciative of individual support, questions were also raised about more substantive investments and systemic adaptations that could provide foundations for First Nations students to achieve collectively, as opposed to the current trend of supporting individual accomplishment.

"Wellbeing" was mentioned both directly and indirectly in participant accounts of their university and course experiences. The exploration of experience and setting revealed perspectives relevant to the attraction, retention, and graduation of First Nations psychology students. These perspectives reflected questions about what it would be like to study psychology and how to stay in the course once enrolled. Participant yarns reflected questions about what university would be like, what courses would entail, how students could expect to be spoken to and spoken about, and what resources and support systems were in place that would help them maintain a balance between various roles and responsibilities within and outside of university. Examples of the kinds of questions of interest are depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: First Nations students' wellbeing-related questions about studying psychology at university



Participants spoke in ways and about things that reflected the foundational domains of First Nations wellbeing that have come more clearly to light in recent research. Connection between student, family, community, and culture were foundational in how many students described their path to psychology and university. Students spoke of personal ambition and aspiration, linked closely with improving psychological services for other First Nations people.

4.1.1 "Never for someone like me"

For some students, attending university involved an uncertain transition into a setting enthusiastically pursued, yet apprehensively approached. Several First Nations psychology students harboured doubts about their ability to gain admission or complete the academic demands of their course, perceiving themselves as either unworthy or incapable of attending university. For some, this long-held perception reflected earlier schooling experiences and resurfaced during interactions that triggered longstanding self-doubt:

> It took me back. So, like I say, when I was growing up, I was actively encouraged to leave school, made to feel like education was not for me. So, in that moment, when I was kind of reminded of that, the message with that is, “You don't belong here. This is not for you. What are you doing?” (Student interview 6)

Students were often their own strongest critic and carried internalised doubt with them into and through their academic journey. Feelings of doubt were intensified through comparison with peers who were seen as better prepared and better resourced:

> I’m looking at all these other non-Indigenous people who have just gone straight from Year 12, really good schools and all of that. And with the full support of their families and, you know, going straight through, done their degree and are at the final stage. And I just kept thinking about how these people are so smart. I’m so different to these people. (Graduate interview 6)

Some First Nations students questioned their place among these other students, reinforcing their self-ascribed impostor status despite their steady progression:

> So, I’ve honestly, I felt like a bit of a fraud because in honours I got in through the Indigenous pathway, rather than my grades, and so I felt like, yeah, like a little bit of a fraud in honours. But to get into masters, I tried to do the alternative pathway scheme again. But they didn’t accept it because it was so competitive to get into. So, I had to get in completely on my own merit. So, the fact that I did has helped me not feel like a fraud anymore. (Student interview 5)

Consequently, university staff may encounter First Nations psychology students grappling with entrenched self-doubt. A participant yarned about the reassurance provided by a staff member in response to their worry about their admission to a masters program. They wondered whether they had been admitted just because they were Aboriginal or had undergone an inferior application process compared with other students:

> No, no, that was my own anxiety causing that thought. But I did verbalise that to one of the masters staff that has been supporting me, and she was like, literally, “that’s not valid”. She was like, “you’ve done everything in your power to become a psychologist, and it doesn’t matter how you got here. We accepted you because we see something in you”. So, that helped. (Student interview 5)

Some students were sensitive to the scrutiny of others about the quality of their academic journey, which instilled an enduring doubt about their achievements, and a question as to whether their pathway was in some way lesser than that taken by other psychology students—despite the absence of evidence to support this concern. Staff and support personnel played a role in challenging and changing this critical self-dialogue and, in doing so, helped affirm students’ sense of connection with their course:

> It's kind of that looming feeling of the "not good enough" or only getting it, like tokenism of getting in, because of being Aboriginal. I know that I met the APAC requirements in order to get into the course, not just because I'm Aboriginal, but, again, that's just like the constant thing in the back of my mind. (Student interview 2)

Complementary pathways provided an important opportunity for First Nations students to access different academic experience; however, student uncertainty about the rigour of such pathways sometimes saw them questioning the legitimacy of their achievements, or anticipating questions from peers regarding their admission, worthiness, and capabilities. Clear explanations of the rationale for different pathways and their integrity may assist all students to recognise the legitimacy of the many paths to and through psychology.

4.1.2 (un)Welcoming signs

A graduate noted that classrooms served as a divide between cultural diversity and psychological paradigms predicated on "white" perspectives. Entering the classroom space required the adoption of a framework that was considered authentic and acceptable as psychology. Students expressed that they simply accepted whatever was taught in class as representing psychology and felt they were unable to question or change it:

> And even if there is clearly cultural diversity in the room, you know, different ancestries and, you know, international students and whatnot, culture got checked at the door, for sure. Everyone put on this like cultural style, almost like a mask in many ways. Like, "Okay, we've arrived in our psychology tutorial and we'll kind of put the 'white psychology speak' on". You know, it was almost like the culture of white psychology that was being taught and modelled, everyone kind of put that on as they went into class and went into tutorials, you know, because that's what was expected and encouraged—this is psychology. (Graduate interview 1)

Students yarned about choosing not to openly disclose their Indigenous identity because of prior interrogatory experiences and uncertainty about how their disclosure would be regarded. A graduate reflected on troubling early encounters that primed their subsequent interactions in classes and tutorials, leading them to prioritise self-protection over self-expression:

> I was getting these messages that in the classroom, in your studies, in your projects, you know, don't talk about your Indigeneity.[1] Don't talk about Black issues. Don't bring culture into the conversation. Just be quiet. So, messages of "this is not a space where cultural identity is welcomed, celebrated, brought into conversation in good ways", right? So, I think it gave me those clear very early red flags of how bad this experience could be if you don't protect yourself and survive in a certain way. (Graduate interview 1)

[1] "Indigeneity" – term referring to Indigenous identity.

Staying quiet was a means of avoiding unwanted attention, particularly if an individual was the only First Nations student in the class:

> I was the only Aboriginal student doing psychology which, you know, it's very isolating and again you don't feel like you can actually say anything, you know. Where am I in this picture? You just stay quiet and just push yourself to get through. I know things are changing now, which is a huge positive, but back then it was a case of just put your head down and just work hard 'cause, it's difficult. And if you make too much noise, then you have to deal with that. (Student interview 6)

Participants reflected on how their appearance as "white-passing"[2] resulted in scrutiny about their Indigenous identity. White-passing students were targeted by curious observers who applied their preconceived views regarding Indigenous identity, without consideration of the effects of this kind of interrogation on the wellbeing of the scrutinised:

> But it's also feeling like an impostor, as an Aboriginal person. Especially, like, being very white, like being white-passing, going, "are you even sure you are Aboriginal?" in a sense, which is a very common experience I've had anyway. "Oh, why are you on an Aboriginal scholarship?" I'm like, "surprise, I'm Aboriginal!" And they're like, "oh, okay", and that's where you usually get like your percentage questions or, "oh, who in your family is Aboriginal?" That's when they actually start with the curiosity, like the curious questions about getting to know you because they want to kind of, I don't know, whether or not to understand from their perspective, if you meet their criteria for what is Aboriginal. (Student interview 2)

Students may be differently willing or able to respond to such interrogation. Some First Nations psychology students saw it as unrelated to their status as a university student and did not appreciate the line of enquiry for that reason. For others, navigating critique about their identity was conflated with doubts about their worthiness to be at university and objections to their access to resources intended for "real" First Nations students. Students described feelings of shame associated with receiving study support, while some white-passing First Nations students feared they would be subjected to peer interrogation of these exclusive provisions. Students felt restricted by the prospect of these interactions and reduced the likelihood of their occurrence by safeguarding their identity from public scrutiny. In this context, a decision not to disclose or discuss may be viewed as reasonable if it reduced subsequent critical enquiry. However, the actual number of First Nations psychology students may also be masked if shame or blame impedes its safe disclosure.

4.1.3 Where am I, where are we?

Being a positive influence and resource for other First Nations people was the basis of many of the yarns about how students came to be studying psychology. Psychology was pursued as a means for the student to become involved in family and community needs

[2] "White-passing": refers to when a person of colour is perceived as white.

in useful ways, whether therapeutically or in the context of research or policy development. The reality of studying psychology at university exposed students to the material, people, and regard (or disinterest) held about them, their families, and their communities. Students worried about the capabilities of their non-Indigenous peers to work in settings and with people important to them and their wellbeing:

> I do know there was no Aboriginal content in the course, and I spent a lot of time thinking, you know, I don't know why I'm studying this because it doesn't seem relevant to me, it doesn't seem to fit the people I know, the people I grew up with. You know, it's not relevant, so why am I even studying this? (Student interview 6)

The absence of meaningful course material caused some students to wonder about how relevant psychology was to the needs of their families and communities. Conversely, the presentation of inappropriate material also raised concerns about how courses implemented their portrayal of First Nations peoples:

> I think that's our big problem. We can have as many pretty slides as you want going through the course. But if racism is allowed to occur within the cohort, what's the point in having all those slides? (Student interview 10)

Pathologising cultural phenomena led some students to question how psychology was teaching them and their peers to view First Nations people. Discrediting meaningful cultural thought and practice as abnormal or insignificant was off-putting for students:

> looking at how we have our cultural beliefs and understandings of, you know, like we have the Dreaming, we have the connection to our ancestors and our spirits and that, but that being seen as delusions and hallucinations within Western culture. So, kind of having that disconnect, it did kind of question a lot of my identity in a sense too, and kind of go, well, this is how I've been raised to see the world, but it doesn't align to what psychology kind of explains the world to be or how we are to be. (Student interview 2)

Psychology's (dis)regard for the lived experience of First Nations peoples may have ramifications for attracting and retaining First Nations psychology students:

> Maybe I shouldn't be able to go into psychology because they don't understand, psychology doesn't understand my lived experience in a sense, and because it is so Westernised. I think that might be even a bit of a deterrent for some people to kind of even consider studying psychology. (Student interview 2)

Along with their own progression, First Nations students expressed a strong interest in how their peers were being taught to think about and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. The reactions of some classmates to this material revealed an apparent lack of prior knowledge which both concerned and motivated First Nations students to champion greater representation in this regard:

> but it's just like they're shocked about the information that they're learning. Like, as an "oh, my God, how could it be like that", or "that's so messed up" type of thing. And they're just shocked, as if they've never learnt this. And I think that's what always catches me. I'm like, "how—how do you not know this?" So yeah, I think it's less of a disrespectful and more of they're literally just uneducated in that regard. (Student interview 7)

Curricular representation

Participants commented on the content in their courses, with many describing the questions it raised for them about the relevance of psychology for their intended work with other First Nations people. A tutor also observed that both the delivery and the content represented First Nations people as special cases, an afterthought, a complication, or a high-risk group. This led to questions about how well courses prepare students to provide safe psychological services for First Nations clients. However, an important caveat to this scenario was offered, when it was identified that incorporating First Nations content to improve Indigenous representation could be triggering for some students. The images, statistics, and messages presented in lectures were experienced as troubling and not merely as impersonal, detached facts. Thought and preparation should be given to the presentation of such materials in classes as part of the development of representative andragogy:

> Like I say, this is going back quite a number of years now, but there generally wasn't Aboriginal content in the course at all. So, this one mention of Aboriginal people was actually quite rare in the entire course, it was almost like it wasn't necessary to even say it. Why make a point of saying it if it was actually just a negative and put us in a negative light? Because, like I say, studying at that time, it was a case of none of this actually fits for me. Where do I fit in here? (Student interview 7)

A graduate noted that First Nations students may experience "gaslighting" or pressure to conform to dominant perspectives and that their critique of established viewpoints led to microaggressions—subtle ways of dismissing or undermining First Nations perspectives—that made students hesitant to express their own views (graduate interview 5). Students were also surprised when their peers appeared oblivious to the plight of many First Nations people. Participants described the burden of concern regarding the suitability and readiness of non-Indigenous students to work with their families and community members based on what they observed in the classroom. Students noted the lack of attention devoted to the realities of First Nations people, and were concerned that what was being taught failed to represent the settings with which they were more familiar and in which their peers could expect to work:

> you know, if we all graduated university now with only this knowledge, and you know people are going to become psychologists with only that knowledge, that kind of was when I posed that question of, oh, how comfortable would I feel about that? (Student interview 8)

A disconnect was also noted regarding how First Nations psychology students were assessed. For example, a participant was left wondering whether their speech and language was the reason for a poor grade because it failed to satisfy the characteristics

of acceptable speech required for psychological assessments. While acknowledging the feedback, the participant was also reassured that their expression would be understandable for the people with whom she sought to work in her community:

> I think to myself, actually that's your, you know, interpretation and your way as a non-Indigenous person telling me that, but actually the way that I'll be speaking and the comfortability that I bring into that space will be just fine for Aboriginal kids. (Graduate interview 6)

Students reported encountering barriers to their desire to conduct undergraduate research with Aboriginal people. Their status as "baby psychologists and baby researchers" meant that interacting with "high-risk First Nations communities" was rejected or cautioned against as a research option (student interview 3). Several students reported feeling frustrated by the lack of discussion around whether there were ways to make encounters safer and by being encouraged instead to undertake adjacent activity, such as conducting a literature review on their topic:

> You know, we always in every, every essay that we write, we always talk about, you know, the limited evidence base there is on working with First Nations consumers. But then we're not going to contribute meaningfully to that evidence base. And you're going to deny opportunities, like, I found that disappointing. (Student interview 3)

Students were pragmatic in their assessment of the opportunities available to them in their academic setting. Questions about remaining enrolled were considered, while others bided their time until the possibility of conducting culturally meaningful research emerged:

> The writing's on the wall. If it was ever going to be a chance in my undergrad to bring [Aboriginal] identity into psychology, this would be it. And I'm getting a very clear, resounding "not interested". So, I took that writing on the wall as nope, it's still not safe. It's still not a place to be. I will shelve this for another space and time. (Graduate interview 1)

4.1.4 Reasons beyond ourselves

A sense of urgency accompanied the deep personal commitment of First Nations psychology students to becoming a positive force in the lives of others. Some participants were driven to act on their dissatisfaction with the status quo, not necessarily for their own immediate benefit, but with a view to making the future better for their family and community members:

> But it is not a world that I am willing to live in. And I'm not saying that from a pessimistic space at all. I'm saying it from a motivated space. I've got to hustle about this because I do not want to see it and I don't want that world for my son or my daughter … And if that's not motivation, I don't know what is. (Student interview 1)

Foremost among the reasons expressed by many students for studying psychology was the aspiration to develop skills and knowledge that would allow them to work well with

mob. Personal ambition to succeed was fuelled for many by the desire to be of service to other Indigenous people. As well as personal hardship, the lived experiences of family members prompted their initial interest in psychology. Students saw a role for psychology in addressing big concerns, such as facilitating an end to intergenerational trauma, or equipping themselves to navigate closer, immediate questions, such as understanding their child's autism diagnosis by learning more about epigenetics and developmental psychology:

> what made it more motivating for me was seeing myself struggle with mental health and my family and community. I wanted to be someone that could help people through things I had gone through and things that I had seen. So, it's like the interest in psychology in general, as well as the motivation to make life better for other people like me. (Student interview 9)

Being able to serve their communities was an important way for students to honour their connection, fulfil their obligations, and positively impact the wellbeing of those important to them. A participant saw psychology as a means by which to address the "drive-in and drive-out service of psychologists" attempting to address suicide rates in their remote home community (graduate interview 6). The desire to improve the safety, availability, accessibility, and regularity of psychological services was central in their decision to study psychology:

> because there is no support service, no psychologist based in small towns like that, let alone being culturally safe, you know. Psychologists who are able to work with mob appropriately. So that's the frustration, you know? And that's why I decided to study psychology and become a psychologist, because of seeing that. (Graduate interview 6)

Family and community representation

While it is the individual student who walks across the graduation stage, there are undoubtedly many others who accompany them in spirit throughout their academic journey. Academic progress was not only viewed as an achievement earned but seen as an achievement shared. A participant spoke fondly of their father's regard for their success and the positive impact this also had for their broader community. The ripple effect on wellbeing was extensive, demonstrating individual student purpose and self-determination, and shared pride for them by other family and community members:

> It makes him feel like he set himself up for his family. Like, that's why he did what he did his whole life and got his own family business and everything, so he could make our lives easier. And seeing that payoff is like seeing me go through uni as well. (Student interview 9)

Family and community were frequently mentioned by participants in ways that underscored the collectivist foundations of First Nations peoples' wellbeing. Family members expressed happiness that their child, grandchild, sister, or brother were set on a path of their choosing and were pleased to offer encouragement and support. Participants also recognised being a role model for others was a way to strengthen connections with family and community members:

> so, I thought I want to do this for myself. I want to do this for the end goal, and I want to do this to be someone that, in the family, they can be proud of and look at as, you know, we are making it, and to show my little sister—you can make it. (Student interview 9)

However, not all students commenced their journey with favourable backing. Their paths to university were obstructed by factors that worked against straightforward or supported engagement. Poor mental health, toxic and abusive living conditions, and limited finances saw some students entering university from settings that had not set them up well for studying. Some pursued their studies while being criticised by family and community members. They persisted with their university aspirations, despite discouragement about their ambition. While student awareness increased through their course involvement, the prevailing understandings of family and community members reflected an ambivalence about psychology, psychologists, and those within First Nations communities who would seek to study psychology:

> When I mentioned I was going to study psychology, there was the question, “why on Earth would you want to work with crazy people?” My response was, “well, maybe I am crazy, so I’ll be with my own!” So, as far as that goes, I still think we have a long way to go in this as well. Psychology in my community was not seen as something good or great or something to aspire to. There’s a lot of stigma around psychology and psychologists and what it is you do. They do wonder why I would do it. (Student interview 6)

4.1.5 Cumulative burdens

A tutor’s reflection on their experience of working with First Nations psychology students expressed the range and extent of demands they saw students facing while navigating their studies. Studying at university stretched personal resources and took attention, energy, and availability away from everyday responsibilities. Maintaining or re-establishing balance amidst prevailing and new demands was a complex puzzle confronting many First Nations psychology students:

> I think a lot of Indigenous students might not believe in themselves, you know, their capacity, they might be worried about whether they can do it. Not all of them, I’m sure, but at the same time, I think they have a lot of, sometimes, social and personal struggles, whether that’s mental health, whether that’s family, whether that’s, you know, being away from Country as well. All these things placed on top. I’m just thinking like, oh, you know, that leaving home, that family, that context is one bit, you know, what about potential racism and things in the classroom? I think there’s just all these things that are exponential for students when they show up into the space. (Support person interview 3)

Colonial and cultural loading

While the transition to new roles brings with it new and different requirements for all students, First Nations psychology students reflected on pressures and expectations

that were more likely to affect them as Indigenous people. Students yarned about expectations placed on them to be cultural experts, and to be available and articulate about First Nations matters. Participants described how improvements to the representation of Indigenous content within psychology have rested on requests for their guidance in ways that constituted an additional “colonial load” specific to their identity as First Nations peoples. Ad hoc requests placed students on the spot and under a spotlight to respond:

> Colonial load is having Aboriginal people take on the role of teaching other people or non-Indigenous people about cultural expectations or how to approach situations regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait people, which might often come at a detriment or an additional burden for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. So, it’s kind of going to Aboriginal people, going, “oh, what do you think about this situation?”, as opposed to doing their own research when it’s out there. (Student interview 2)

While enhancing the quantity of First Nations content may be viewed as building cultural proficiency, it may simultaneously underestimate the additional load placed on the First Nations students expected to authorise and facilitate that learning. The assumption that First Nations students would be willing or able to explain their experience or assume leadership in activities concerning First Nations matters constituted an additional stress for them. Despite this, students felt an obligation to serve as positive cultural representatives yet were concerned that the continual delegation of responsibilities to them diminished non-Indigenous students and staff from being personally proactive with such matters.

While expressions of empathy were offered by those seeking to support First Nations student concerns, there remained uncertainty regarding their actual willingness to listen, or whether what they expressed in First Nations company was consistent with what they said in other settings. This led some students to wonder about the position that certain staff members or students held. This uncertainty contributed to “cognitive burden” associated with the anticipation of racist or culturally unsafe actions from familiar and unfamiliar students, staff members, or researchers:

> Do you have any concerns that someone’s going to say something stupid? Yeah, that’s cognitive burden. And that takes up energy, it’s colonial load. So, yeah, I felt very isolated, waiting for people to say something stupid. (Graduate interview 2)

Engaging with these various burdens was motivated by First Nations psychology students’ desire to improve the cultural literacy of fellow students and safety of First Nations peers. However, doing so placed some students in unsafe scenarios in which they were exposed to interrogation and pushback from antagonistic opponents or ignorant critics:

> it was just critically important to me that they were safe for Aboriginal people. That really was my objective. The byproduct was that I was exposed to an unsafe environment … So yeah, it was about safety and, through that process, yeah, it meant that I put myself in a very unsafe situation and it continued to become more unsafe. And, you know, that had a real cost on me and my wellbeing. (Student interview 10)

A student recounted the personal toll that "standing up" for First Nations issues had on their senior colleague's academic aspirations. The impact of advocating for other First Nations psychology students within an unresponsive setting led to their withdrawal from their PhD course as a means of restoring their own wellbeing:

> [my colleague] had spent so much time and energy having to advocate for herself that, in the end, she put aside the PhD. She's like, "I'm not doing that. I'm just going to finish with the master's and move on". (Student interview 8)

A tutor described their student's account of a classroom incident wherein they were treated as a receptacle for the emotional discomfort felt by students and staff during a discussion about an Indigenous topic. First Nations psychology students may feel that they are not only expected to be cultural authorities but are also placed in the position of providing forgiveness to the repentant. Participants noted that responsibility for safety should be shared by the enquirer, and not an additional burden placed on First Nations students to be a convenient source of expertise or absolution:

> Yeah, that's what she told me, that everyone just kept saying sorry. And she was like, "what are you sorry about? Why are you looking only at me?" From her perspective, she felt like most in the spotlight, and it was just not—it was nothing about the content of the class. She felt that she didn't learn anything from that class and all she took away from it was that people were just saying sorry to her and to possibly someone else who was Indigenous in the class. And it was just very weird. (Support person interview 7)

Concurrent adaptation of material

A participant described the load associated with adapting conventional course material for their community's circumstance. They first worked with unfamiliar concepts to understand it for themselves and then demonstrated that understanding through assessment and supervision tasks. They then revisited and revised the concepts and materials in ways that would have meaning for the people with whom they were intending to work. The process of reception, assimilation, application, and translation raised questions for them about their capacity to keep doing so, and the priorities of the profession that required them to do so:

> So, like, I'm doing this extra processing and that as well and I'll think about it, like, when I finish this program, I'm going to also then have to try to adapt all of this stuff to who I'm going to be working with. So, I'd wondered about whether it was the right space for me, just with all those questions around that stuff and whether I belong, whether I was good enough. (Graduate interview 6)

Straddling the disconnect between First Nations knowledge and mainstream psychology meant walking with one foot in the Western world and one foot in the Indigenous world—a tenuous scenario in which to maintain balance. Concerns about their capacity to do so were accompanied by observations of their classmates and how well they were being prepared to adapt the prevailing material to work well with First Nations peoples.

4.1.6 Systemic racism and negative stereotyping

Race-based tension sat at the heart of many First Nations psychology student and graduate yarns. Blatant, naïve, deliberate, or subtle encounters unsettled students and their engagement with university in various ways, prompting some to remain discrete about their identity to avoid being targeted. Participants also commented on how tokenism or cruel invalidation contributed to the gaslighting they experienced, making access to safe spaces and supportive relationships paramount under such circumstances:

> In a tutorial, students were saying things like, "all Aboriginal people are alcoholics, they're homeless, can't get their shit together. They're a menace to society. My dad says that they should be all shot". It was revolting, absolutely revolting. And it was just let rip [by the tutor]. There's no interference, there was no managing. There was no shutting down, there was no … It was just, it was just allowed to go on. I literally stood up out of my chair and said, "no, no. Like you can't say these things. That's not true. These are stereotypes. What you're saying is not accurate", and then I got ganged up on by maybe three or four people saying, "yeah, it is, like, this is true. Aboriginal people are horrible". And I had that nervous system response of fury. (Graduate interview 1)

For some students, self-preservation carried with it a burden of helplessness to support other First Nations psychology students, who in turn could become isolated. Students expressed concern about the ramifications of raising a complaint about racist or other unsafe behaviour, worrying that it might reduce their likelihood of acceptance into further studies. How or whether to respond to instances of racism was a decision faced by many students:

> But I think students are terrified, particularly in a course like psychology, about speaking up or raising issues. You basically have to have an HD [high distinction] average to get into honours. You've then gotta try and maintain those grades and get experience to get into a masters program. It's really, really difficult getting through this pathway. So why would you do anything that could result in you getting lower grades? (Student interview 10)

For some, defiant responses were given in the moment when stereotypes of First Nations people were asserted, unchallenged, or left unmanaged by university staff, who became bystanders to unsafe encounters, rather than active in confronting racism and stereotyping. A consequence for First Nations students speaking up was the perception that they be viewed as difficult or problematic for doing so. For some students, avoiding such a reputation was favoured over responding to discrimination and racism. Deciding to continue, students wondered whether the conditions within this setting supported them or exposed them to unsafe encounters and the ever-present load of anticipating subsequent conflict. Were these conditions that allowed students to fully and safely engage with the university learning journey or were they to progress as a shadow of themselves, worried about the prospect of further disrespectful, undignified encounters or punitive repercussions?

> if I think about what that taught me, [it] was universities are unsafe spaces. Tutorials can be unsafe spaces, an unsafe space. Lecturers won't step in to take care of you. They will permit it. They'll let it go. And that if you stick your neck out as an Aboriginal person, you will be ganged up on, and that's violence, right? I learnt that it was unsafe to say your identity, unsafe to stick up for your mob. I had to use anger to shut it down [in the tutorial]. This situation had to escalate with me standing up, saying, "come to my face and say that". I had to be in an activated state to shut it down. (Graduate interview 1)

Other lessons were learnt from such experiences. Uncontested demonstrations of racist behaviour or stereotypical assertions directly or indirectly served to diminish the expression of First Nations perspectives, or prompt furious counterresponses from some students. Participants used different images to describe the spectrum and variability of their experience of academic freedom and punitive containment:

> Sometimes, at its most extreme, it feels like a concentration camp that I walk into. And other times, it feels like an unbelievable freeing … An unbelievably liberating beacon of free expression and thought. So, pick your day. It'll be somewhere in between. (Student interview 1)

"You should be grateful"

Students reported receiving advice to the effect that, rather than seek to change unpleasant circumstances, they should express gratitude for the opportunity to learn from them. Students were told it was for their own good that they learn to cope and behave professionally in noxious circumstances. It was unclear whether this approach was explained prior to confrontational encounters or employed as a post hoc explanation to validate lecturer inaction or shift responsibility and focus onto First Nations students to handle it. These scenarios also raised questions about the consequences for the other students involved in this exchange: were they aware of their educative role, and did they receive subsequent instruction about their conduct with First Nations students and people generally?

> It was kind of thrown back at us of, well, basically, if they can't handle racism in this context, and they get upset about it, well, how are they going to go in the real world as a psychologist? (Student interview 10)

These details were not explored but could be seen as adding to the burden of concern regarding how non-Indigenous students were being equipped to work with First Nations peoples as clients and colleagues. Another student described receiving feedback from their non-Indigenous lecturer advising them how they should have written about their First Nations identity in an assignment. The student explained their concerns but was not convinced that the lecturer had genuinely listened to their account of how their First Nation's identity was expressed:

> And, yeah, that was quite ironic considering it was literally a subject about Indigenous peoples. He took it on board. I think there was also an element, because his wife was Aboriginal, she was from [an Aboriginal community], and so I think he had an element that he felt like he was educated enough. And yeah, so he said, "oh, okay, I'll take that on board". But it just didn't seem genuine at all. (Student interview 7)

The student also described what it felt like to address their lecturer about the feedback:

> Oh, I'm not a confrontational person, so confrontation scares me. And then on top of that, you know, it's like he was kind of questioning my culture, I guess. And I was [like], "you have absolutely no right to do that. And then you give me feedback on an academic assignment for this". I'm like "this is so inappropriate" and, yeah, it made me so mad. (Student interview 7)

Instructing others on how to be better First Nations people or articulate their identity raised questions and emotions for the student in this encounter. Encouragement in supporting students to articulate themselves and respectful curiosity about how this may be achieved represents another way of framing and privileging student representation of their heritage. Engagement in inclusive and attentive discussions of this type are demonstrative of respectful enquiry and dignified feedback.

Tokens and tokenism

Participants expressed concerns about the support opportunities offered for First Nations students within the discipline. While appreciated, they were sometimes perceived as temporary and tokenistic, providing a sugar hit of acknowledgment, rather than a more substantial and sustaining measure of basic support. The sincerity and sustainability of supportive provisions were observed by a support person as being more like decoration than dedication—a superficial concession to inconvenience, rather than a thoughtful and integrated effort. Such surface-level engagement "perpetuates this, like, oh, it's just a 'tack on', 'we just have to do it to tick it', a bit 'tick-boxy' is probably the right word … and I find that really uncomfortable" (Support person interview 1).

A student yarned about how the lack of remuneration had very real consequences for their wellbeing at the university. The effort, or lack thereof, to resolve the concern for the student was seen as communicating a message about their worth in the organisation: "it's like we're so overlooked, you know? So undervalued. Anything that's done feels tokenistic and shallow in terms of progress. It's a hard space to be in" (student interview 1). Resource provisions were also regarded cautiously:

> And then, you know, like, when it comes to financially supporting stuff, like, there's a tokenistic 10 grand given to the group every year to, you know, send students to conferences or fund artwork or research or, you know, publications and things like that. Outside of that, forget about it, non-existent. (Student interview 1)

A tutor urged consideration of how responses to support requests were validated as substantive, as opposed to merely performative. Their concern suggested that meaningful change required discussion, "so that these spaces don't also appropriate representation so that it looks like we're doing inclusion, like we're doing change. But what does it look like versus what are we actually doing, I guess, is the question" (Support person interview 3). A student corroborated this perspective by describing how it felt to be intermittently deployed as a novelty, as opposed to meaningfully integrated into the university ecosystem:

> You know, I said, "can't this stuff be across the year? Why is it only, you know, if you want stuff?" … So yeah, I've said I want this to be across the year, not just a "we've got an Indigenous postgrad", like a show pony. (Graduate interview 2)

A lack of considered and substantive integration made First Nations psychology students feel as if they were used as convenient departmental display pieces. While doing so may be seen as raising the profile of First Nations psychology students, their perspectives raise questions about what this display does for their wellbeing. Clarity regarding the terms and conditions of being a student recipient of departmental or institutional resource should make such expectations explicit, and events requiring student involvement should do so in ways that respect students' meaningful inclusion.

4.1.7 Competition, bottlenecks, and jealousies

First Nations psychology students described their academic journeys as fast-paced, unrelenting, and involving requirements that created tension as they navigated their ambitions to be both professionally accredited and culturally safe. Participants described the bottlenecks created due to the competitiveness of psychology courses, particularly when pursuing places in postgraduate programs:

> You know, we're forced into a position where we have to be straight HD students to get through. We have to know the answers. We can't make mistakes. We're terrified of making mistakes. And so, I think that we're breeding the culture within psychology that doesn't lend itself to developing humility. (Student interview 10)

Possibilities for ongoing course engagement became more selective and were seen to favour students who were not only academically sound but also resourced to meet the basic needs of everyday life. Financial pressures and familial responsibilities within increasingly demanding settings created tension when attempting to balance their roles and responsibilities as students and community members. While support from family and community helped students to continue, this also exerted additional pressure on them to ensure basic stability for students over their period of study. Stress accompanied the

journey to complete each stage and reduce the likelihood of withdrawing at these bottlenecks.

It is likely that a degree of sacrifice and commitment is expected of all students to meet their course requirements, and if students are clear about those requirements, they will be better placed to make decisions and take actions that enable their ongoing engagement. Measures to support the inclusion and retention of First Nations psychology students were an appreciated and contested resource. For some students, access to financial, scholarship, mental health, and/or accommodation support was the difference between their ongoing participation or their struggling and withdrawal from their course, yet their access to support opportunities was questioned or challenged by others interested in how they got there and what they had received:

> It's not like anyone gets an easy route through, because that's obviously the other thing that people often then say: "oh, you're making it too easy for people. There's the real PhD and the fake PhD" or whatever. "The real degree and the fake one". Well, you know, "Aboriginal people just have to make one car payment, and they get the car for free after that", and all of this rubbish. (Support person interview 8)

Participants reflected on whether the 2023 National Referendum[3] emboldened opposition within some universities to measures aimed at the consideration of First Nations issues and the support of First Nations students. There was speculation as to whether the Referendum outcome had enabled expression of disapproval for measures targeting First Nations students, with equity-based provisions seen as being to the exclusive and unfair advantage of First Nations recipients. The perception of preferential treatment attenuated feelings of jealousy on behalf of those who felt excluded.

The litany of individual achievement

Personal resilience was seen as essential for navigating and advancing in educational settings that would enable First Nations psychology students to "defy the odds so that beautiful things could come of it. It's not all doom and gloom, you know. Good things can come from bad. Not so much a silver lining as it is a rose from the concrete" (student interview 1). A PhD supervisor reflected on the tendency to validate and celebrate individual First Nations psychology student accomplishments against the odds. They considered that student success was portrayed as individual triumph over adversity, or achievement despite the overwhelming presence of numerous burdens and obstacles:

> Well, I don't think the idea is just to celebrate an individual who manages to, you know, go through something that's awful. Like, why don't we just remove at least some of the awful bits, if not all of them, right? (Support person interview 8)

The supervisor argued that the narrative of individual achievement against the odds required transformation, whereby individual and group success was normalised in future

[3] The 2023 Voice Referendum concerned a proposed Constitutional amendment in Australia aimed at establishing a formal advisory body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, ensuring their permanent representation and recognition in government decisions. The amendment was rejected in both the state and national vote counts, with the Australian Capital Territory being the only state or territory with a majority "yes" vote.

contexts that were safe, supportive, and academically rigorous. While not underplaying the efforts of First Nations psychology students, acceptance of the litany of hard-fought individual achievement may inadvertently divert attention from systemic reforms that could create environments enabling more individuals to achieve and flourish. This idea was explored by participants who encouraged examination of the features of the "concrete" that stifled broader possibilities for achievement.

University as a site of flourishing

The construction of universities as dynamic and diverse settings underscored the evolving qualities of higher education contexts and the contributions of stakeholders involved in enabling students to engage well with the academic challenges and opportunities provided as part of their tertiary education:

> The analogy is, if a flower in a garden isn't flourishing, you wouldn't give them positive talk to make that flower flourish. You would actually fertilise, nurture, and water the soil. You would make the soil richer and fertile and have all the right weather conditions for flourishing. And then on its own, the flower will actually flourish … So, when I think about Aboriginal psychology student wellbeing and flourishing, it's not about how good they're coping. It's are we creating the conditions to support flourishing? (Graduate interview 1)

The focus on wellbeing was viewed as an increasingly important element in the groundswell of support for universities to not only be viewed as sites of academic excellence, but also as places where students do not have to endure racism, feel unsafe, or fear exclusion in order to be there. On the contrary, the image of universities as wellbeing-promoting spaces was suggested as an attractive reputation that institutions could strive for:

> [University is] a place that I can go and be really well, have a great experience and I come out of it an educated person—more educated than I was in a bunch of different ways … but I think that's where the agency stuff absolutely comes in, and that self-leadership part comes in … I think the value proposition for an organisation is actually a fundamental focus on wellbeing, as in, it's known as that right. (Graduate interview 4)

While additional systematic enquiry may be warranted to develop the evidence for this wellbeing-centric proposition, participant input to this project indicated that yarns were already occurring to this effect.

5. Findings Part 2: Features and examples of wellbeing support

5.1 Demonstrations of genuine positive regard

Studying at university represents an implicit wellbeing proposition for First Nations psychology students. Student journeys to and within their psychology courses described encounters and expectations that affected key aspects of their wellbeing in various ways. Students did not enter university as "empty vessels" but rather approached their courses with a range of reasons for doing so, along with questions about what to expect. Students also expressed doubts and hesitation as they reconciled support for their academic aspirations with discouragement internalised from prior educational experience or expressed by unconvinced members of their social networks or university peers.

Figure 2: Key themes associated with university settings and student experience that support the wellbeing of First Nations psychology students



Key wellbeing themes acknowledged a range of circumstances and opportunities relevant to students' academic journeys (see Figure 2). These elements refer to student attributes, external support measures, and setting features that in unison act to optimise First Nations psychology students' opportunities to engage safely, meaningfully, and rigorously with the academic demands and expectations of their psychology course.

Combined, these features serve to create settings that reflect genuine positive regard for First Nations psychology students and highlight ways in which students may assert agency that enables them to flourish among the challenges and opportunities offered.

5.2 Strategies and examples of positive wellbeing interactions and activities

The following sections discuss these key themes and provide examples of their contribution to student wellbeing. Participant quotations illustrate each element and address the contextual questions detailed in Findings Part 1 relating to the wellbeing experiences of First Nations psychology students. The five themes are not presented in order of importance but rather should be seen as complementary and interconnected qualities demonstrative of genuine positive regard.

5.2.1 Affirmations of place: Opportunities to connect and belong

"Affirmations of place" encompass activities and behaviours that facilitate inclusion, connection, and belonging at university and, more specifically, in the context of psychology courses. Affirmations of place help address student doubts about their worthiness to be studying and show students that they have a place within their chosen course. These are important gestures, particularly at the commencement of university journeys, as students may arrive hesitant about their place within the institution and its courses.

Allyship matters

Students reported finding their initial period challenging as they familiarised themselves with their physical and virtual surroundings. Accessible, early guidance decreased their worry and supported smoother transitions. Provision of timely information helped students with their adjustment by encouraging engagement with useful resources and personnel. The effect of a warm welcome was described by students as a defining experience at the commencement of their journey that helped cement their choice of university. The quality of first contact did much to allay students' concerns and fears. The moment could act as an impetus for connection and indication of where a student fit in culturally and institutionally. Doubts over belonging or feelings of isolation were also mediated by warm "human connections" in an otherwise large and unfamiliar institution:

> And the first thing [the staff member] said to me was, "I know exactly who you are 'cause you look just like your mum". And they gave me a little spiel about university and things like that. And that was how I chose my university … there was that connection. (Student interview 8)

The external appearance of higher education institutions provided First Nations psychology students with their first tangible impressions of university. Participants yarned about the "colonial" architecture, referring not only to the structure of buildings and landscapes, but also to the values and ideas that underpinned their construction. Participants reflected that institutions and their namesakes evoked punitive and

traumatic associations, “yet we’re supposed to just walk into these spaces. Pretend like it’s safe that we belong here, when we’re the first people in our families usually to even set foot in this building or set foot in, you know, like, get accepted into these spaces” (student interview 1).

The student proposed that a preferable first impression could be that universities offer a “conciliatory starting point to put out the hand and say, you know, ‘I’m an ally’, which is so crucial in this space that is on our Country and yet so reflective of colonial values” (student interview 1). This student felt that this approach could help ease the misgivings or uncertainties of First Nations students entering those grounds for the first time. Their provision could be a sincere signal that First Nations students were welcome and had a place on physical and virtual campuses.

For some First Nations psychology students, attending university constituted their first move to a predominantly non-Indigenous setting. Students expressed that being acknowledged and understood by non-Indigenous people in positions of authority had a distinctly positive effect that contrasted sharply with their typical experience. Demonstrations of genuine positive regard from university personnel in positions of authority and expertise within psychology programs were appreciated, as it communicated to students that they mattered and that their place within the course was actively encouraged:

> So, to have, like, a non-Indigenous man who was quite understanding around not just, like, the cultural stuff, but also just having someone that’s understanding around just, you know, how it is. Yeah, it feels really good to actually feel understood. It’s a different experience, one that I’m definitely not used to. (Graduate interview 6)

An important part of the university journey for students involved broadening their social networks. For some, the on-campus experience was a highlight of their time at university. Students expressed that it was okay to be patient and build connections gradually. Making new friends was not always straightforward, but establishing new connections had a positive effect on their course and broader university experience:

> uni can be fun and it can be a new experience that you enjoy, especially if you make new friends in your classes. I guess the first bit of advice is talk to people, make friends, and then make it, like, you sort of have to make that environment for yourself—if you want it to be a fun, enjoyable space, you have to make it that way. So go out, make friends, talk to people in your classes to make your journey easier. (Student interview 9)

Indigenous centres were described as supportive places to study because students were more likely to meet like-minded people with whom they could connect. Participants described how Indigenous study centres could facilitate home-like experiences of belonging within the broader university setting and that this could ward off feelings of isolation. However, the experience of Indigenous centres was not always consistent, with one student reflecting on how their engagement with centres at different universities varied markedly, particularly in terms of centre outreach (student interview 2).

Staying connected was difficult during busy study periods, but it was during such times that connections were particularly important. Informal get-togethers were a way for First Nations students to stay connected with mob within psychology and from different courses. Coming together in casual ways helped maintain the network of connections with people and places on campus that supported First Nations identity and relationships with other students and support personnel.

Staff-led affirmations

Participants described many ways that university staff had played a role in helping to establish and reinforce their sense of place and belonging at university and within their psychology course. Students described the stress associated with entering spaces in which the regard of First Nations people was unknown, leading them to become vigilant to the prospect of scrutiny or interrogation of their place there. Their engagement in class activities became tentative and cautious, focused more on self-preservation and safety. Teaching staff played a significant role in ameliorating these concerns by setting the tone and expectation for sites of interaction as inclusive and safe for all students:

> When I first applied at [university], I had the manager of the student services at the SIS[4] reach out to me personally like, “hey, I saw your application, and I just want to introduce myself. I’m [staff name] and I just want to learn about you. How can I support you? What can we do? I want to tell you what we offer. Feel free to absolutely come down and see us anytime. That’s what we’re here for”. It’s even just a simple conversation like that that can absolutely change the engagement of students. (Student interview 2)

Academic staff disarmed classroom student cohorts by reframing how psychologists could interact with First Nations peoples and addressed the fear associated with doing the wrong thing through practice examples and appropriate disclosure of their own experience in that space. Lecturers demonstrated leadership through welcoming First Nations psychology students to the campus, course, or classroom. Lecturer facilitation skills that permitted and supported robust discussion of academic material were appreciated and communicated to First Nations students that their perspectives were recognised in that setting. Genuine attention to good first impressions created a tone supportive of ongoing engagement that established a greater sense of place and belonging:

> throughout that program, it was really good having [staff member] as the course coordinator, because he’d reached out to me and another Indigenous student that was studying the program as well, prior to the program, just, you know, introducing himself and saying he’s there to support us if we need. (Graduate interview 6)

Early efforts to establish connection, alongside intermittent check-ins with students, were appreciated. The initial groundwork, along with small gestures and ongoing investments of time, helped tend to the relationship that students were establishing with their course and institution, serving to affirm their place within them. Students appreciated the

[4] SIS: School of Indigenous Studies.

acknowledgement of their presence and opportunities to connect. An important positive consequence was that these good connections were able to then accommodate student problems or concerns in the event that difficulties arose later:

> And he [staff member] said, “look, let me know what you need”, you know, and “I'm here for support”—that was gold. And look, it was probably only a handful of times throughout the course that we chatted, but, you know, those handful of times were, you know, critically important. (Student interview 10)

A student reported that strong connections proved crucial later in their course by providing the platform on which to broach emerging problems. Efforts placed into establishing clear avenues to connect were consequential for student retention by providing a safe space in which students could speak openly about their wellbeing needs and impediments to their capacity to stay engaged. This suggested that it was not merely the availability of wellbeing supports that were impactful. Creation of processes through which students were able to safely engage with staff on emergent matters also provided ways for students to disclose their concerns and work collaboratively on suitable steps forward:

> So, when something happened, I reached out … And that felt really, really good to have that support and that respect. So, without his support, I probably wouldn’t have passed my course because it was a make-or-break thing. (Graduate interview 6)

These avenues were not necessarily used frequently or at all over the course of a student’s academic journey; however, the efforts made to establish clear and safe lines of communication were beneficial when the need to engage with them occurred. Knowing there was a supportive outlet helped reduce feelings of isolation or a sense of feeling trapped by their concern. Proactive communication by staff demonstrated respect for the views of First Nations psychology students and provided insight into students’ situations. The opportunity to do so was often viewed positively by students as a sign of the self-reflexivity and genuine positive regard of attentive staff:

> I’ve been really appreciative that they’ve also had that outreach. Just being able to ask those questions. They give their patience as well, but they also say, “hey, look, how did you feel the content landed?”, as well, just being open and approachable as well and willing to take—not take criticism, like, take on the feedback, but also being self-reflexive in their own practices is massive. (Student interview 2)

Staff members increased the likelihood of connection and belonging by demonstrating support publicly through words and actions that addressed the inconsiderate conduct of others towards or about First Nations people. Interventions were not necessarily numerous, but were quick, consistent, and demonstrated that the lecturer was vigilant for offensive actions in their classroom. Students appreciated the demonstration of visible allyship. Support of this kind demonstrated attention to classroom safety and helped reinforce the respectful values expected of students within that space.

A student reflected on how a lecturer's uncommon actions at the time helped them feel seen and safe in their classroom context. While Acknowledgement of Country has become a fixture in some units, participants sometimes wondered whether the gesture was genuine, or would "give off, like, off vibes … like, they're just doing it for show, you know? Like, they don't actually mean what they're doing":

> but this is back in 2012, you know, so this is not like a popular thing to do, Acknowledgements of Country. And he did it every single week. So, the first lecture of the semester, he would always give a proper Acknowledgement of Country, and I didn't even really know what that was at the time. You know, I just thought, I'm seen, I feel validated. This is a safe space. (Student interview 1)

A lecturer described their effort to integrate their acknowledgement with the content for their lecture in order to make it integral to the session, rather than a disconnected and fleeting statement at the beginning, and not merely as an administrative or mandatory gesture. The lecturer was keen that acknowledgements were delivered sincerely and were integral to subsequent unit content. This required additional effort and action on their behalf, and it was acknowledged that the relevance was not always readily apparent. However, the endeavour was usefully thought-provoking for the lecturer, as they reflected on their work and how it could more meaningfully reflect the intent inherent in Acknowledgements of Country:

> I try to make connection with what I just said with the acknowledgement, with whatever social psychology topic we were talking about that day. So, that's my way of making the connection actual, it means something sincere. (Support person interview 4)

Incorporation of Aboriginal content was possible and an important way for students to see themselves represented in the course and recognise its relevance for themselves, their families, and their communities. However, the mere presence of Indigenous resources did not ensure their quality or meaning for students. Students supported decolonising work regarding Indigenous people that focused on strengths-based knowledge and First Nations perspectives. Further, engagement in professional discussion about the implications and applications of novel material was preferred, rather than an approach directing students to a singular way of knowing and doing:

> I found that, yeah, in every subject, I'm pretty sure every single subject that I've done, they've always incorporated Indigenous culture, and I think they've also done it on a good level, where it's like—this is what we know, but we're also not the experts on this type of thing. They've taught it in a respectful way of, like, we want to share this information, but we're not the experts on what we're sharing right now because usually it is, you know, non-Indigenous people who are teaching it. (Student interview 7)

Discussions framing information in practical terms added depth to descriptive overviews of a topic or issue. First Nations lecturers were also recognised for offering both cultural and professional perspectives that enriched the teaching environment. Such representation was likely of benefit to all students, as it provided them with valuable opportunities to see, hear, and engage with First Nations professionals. Tutors enhanced

assessment processes by respecting student experience and highlighting the unique insights that First Nations psychology students could contribute to their assignments. This approach encouraged students to recognise their lived experiences as valuable and relevant—not only for the assessment task, but also in reflecting on their long-term aspirations to work with mob. Messages that students brought valuable and useful experience to their educational journey reduced the stress associated with feelings of doubt and disconnection. Further, the incorporation of material derived from the lived experience of First Nations psychology students about their families and communities demonstrated a willingness to better understand and appropriately respond to those concerns:

> so, my tutors are actually very good and were supportive. They said in terms of the assignment, it's actually a benefit for you that you are Aboriginal because that group will connect with you more. And they gave me ideas on what I can say and how to say, you know, "I'm an Aboriginal healthcare worker, this is what I do, this is how I can support you", that type of stuff. (Student interview 9)

Taking a seat

Affirming collegial invitations allowed First Nations psychology students to see themselves as part of the profession. Students likened the feeling to that of being invited to have "a seat at the table" (student interview 6)—a table from which they had previously been excluded or did not see themselves at. Staff affirmation of student potential challenged discouraging messages they may have received during their earlier school experiences. The effect was transformative in aiding students to soften a belief of "I don't belong here" to "I can belong here" and offered the impression that what they brought to the table was valuable:

> And at that point in time, I think that I had some supports that were non-Aboriginal but were heavily involved at university—another PhD student at that point and another professor—who were able to kind of talk to, or talk through, what I was feeling. I didn't say what had been said, but I talked to them, and they helped me feel okay about continuing in psychology. We'd have those conversations that made me feel like maybe I do belong. Yeah. So, it's that inclusion, that belongingness that I didn't necessarily get in the lectures. I had people there. They were also in that same world, the academic world, who also made me feel like I had a seat at the table. (Student interview 6)

Encountering possibility

Students developed agency and self-determination through their exposure to roles and workplaces that enabled them to refine their academic choices. Providing students with opportunities to experience real-world work environments was highly beneficial in this regard. Students noted that early exposure offered valuable insights, allowing them to affirm their career choices or reconsider their professional focus:

> I was in a policy directorate. It wasn't terribly interesting, but in second year, I actually went to the Centre for Clinical Interventions, so an outpatient public psychology clinic, and that was when I got to see this is what my career looks like, and I wanted it, I really wanted it. (Student interview 8)

Students reported finding their initial interests refined by their encounters with actual workplaces. Working in an Aboriginal health organisation provided an opportunity to see how university education had applications for community and family—the sites "where change happens" (student interview 3). Psychology was also seen as a way of upskilling existing skills and competencies, such as in alcohol and drug counselling. Opportunities to see psychology in action enabled students to gain a clearer perspective on how it could build their capacity to respond better to client and community needs.

Participants identified that exposure to future workplace realities was a useful strategy to assist students to envision themselves in their future roles. Doing so helped address concerns that psychology was not based in the "real world" or failed to reflect the realities of their world. Demonstration of what psychology had to offer First Nations people played an important role in cementing their commitment, energising their journey, and clarifying their destination. A student reflected that work placements had been "eye-opening" and "confronting" but helped determine for them whether "you had the resilience and if you could work in that environment. That was good. It was really good to just be hands on, and I think that needs to be some sort of experience and that could be arranged for Aboriginal students" (student interview 4).

> First year would be important to give them a little taste of what it actually entails, because it just sounds glossy to be a psychologist, but what does that actually entail? You're gonna be exhausted by the end of the week. You might have some of that vicarious trauma, you might be trying to work through your own traumas at the same time. It's gonna be really tiring. How would you handle it? Do you have that resilience and personal strength? (Student interview 4)

Exposure to the reality of psychological work also showed how psychological theory related to real-world situations. As encounters with possible futures, students could evaluate how psychology could meet the diverse social and emotional wellbeing needs of First Nations people or point to gaps in that understanding that they could work to close. This encouraged students to begin planning research projects or target professional specialisations that aligned with their goals and integrated their sense of purpose and control:

> I was very fortunate in where I worked that I got to sit in on sessions with the First Nations psychologists, and because I was weighing up "do I want to do research, or do I want to be a psychologist? I don't know." I was leaning towards more research but then being able to sit in those sessions and see in real time, you know, that's what I want to be. (Student interview 3)

Simulating future scenarios was a powerful method for linking current tasks to real-world employment contexts. This approach made the purpose of classwork and assessments

more intentional and less abstract, enabling the student to identify concrete goals, desired outcomes, and the necessary steps to achieve those professional aspirations. A student reflected, “it was fun to sort of theorise and plan about, in the future, what I could be doing as a psychologist in that assignment; [it] was cool to see” (student interview 9).

Conferences, meetings, and other gatherings provided opportunities for students to connect with others in the field. Participants reported feeling uplifted by the experience of attending gatherings and conferences, and spending time with esteemed First Nations leaders. Not only did this allow them to envisage future scenarios and associations, but it also communicated to them that others saw potential for them in the space. Students expressed the benefit of people teaching who had that lived experience. Meeting veterans of the profession enabled students to hear from those who had navigated their journey, who came from similar backgrounds or encountered similar challenges to themselves. Seeing that it was possible to succeed as a First Nations person inspired students to picture themselves progressing and taking their place as graduates. It was seen as important that opportunities be explored for First Nations students to be mentored by former graduates.

Participants expressed a desire for increased opportunities to engage with Indigenous issues. For some, being able to work on these topics under the guidance of experienced Aboriginal researchers was a memorable part of their university experience that motivated them to continue with their studies:

> And I noticed I didn’t actually have a lot of those down times like I did during my undergraduate degree, or, like, the depression or the ideations or intent even. And even now, in my master’s and my PhD, I haven’t experienced any of that. I’m not sure if it’s because, again, I’m embedded within a cultural safety project where I’m working with mob and having that culture and that community engagement, as well as my knowledge being accepted and appreciated. In a sense, that’s been an absolute protective factor in itself. (Student interview 2)

Working alongside cultural mentors within culturally affirming projects in which First Nations perspectives and knowledges were privileged positively influenced student experience and, according to one student, was an important factor in their improved wellbeing and engagement with their ongoing studies.

Navigating mutual respect

Mindful outreach was conducted when attention was paid to the roles and status of participants in an interaction. A former student commented on the powerful impact of being allowed to feel equal on the quality of their subsequent interactions with a course coordinator, permitting issues that may have become insurmountable to be addressed in respectful and productive ways:

> And that’s definitely what I feel as well. He’s up there. I’m a student, but when I’m talking to him, I feel equal. It makes me feel comfortable and like I’m an equal. That is a very powerful thing because then it makes me feel comfortable to talk to him and open up, to just be completely honest with him about everything that I’ve been through. He creates that safe space and that’s been really powerful. (Graduate interview 6)

Fostering mutual respect, treating each other with dignity, and recognising each other's unique strengths enabled the academic staff member referred to in the quotation above to co-create a supervisory relationship that was attentive to and respectful of the student's perspectives and their own expertise. A tutor compared their role to being a "co-pilot" with students, collaborating with and guiding them through their academic responsibilities, while sharing the wheel of direction-taking and decision-making throughout the journey:

> And so, I think it just worked from having that mutual respect and that mutual understanding of what each of us brings, and what the other complements to that, in order for it to be successful. Because there's lots of things that I don't know or can never know or have a lived experience of, and there are things that I do know or have experience of that she doesn't have or doesn't have yet, but might if she works, you know, for 20 more years in research. So, it just sort of, at least from my perspective, seemed to work really, really well because of that mutual respect and equal power or no power differential. (Support person interview 8)

Valuing veteran involvement

First Nations psychology graduates were regarded as valuable role models for current students—not as flawless individuals, but as those who had persevered through likely similar difficulties. Current students saw graduates as having "been through the trenches" (student interview 2), highlighting their resilience with challenges inherent in the academic journey. Knowing that others with whom they felt connected had accomplished the goal they had now set for themselves was motivating and reassuring:

> they've definitely paved the way for us, made it more possible and, like, even though I say it's quite Westernised now, still, like, there have been adaptations based on recommendations of, you know, people coming through before us, and that's definitely something for you guys to be proud of. But also, like, it's so good for us to be able to have you mob already before us, paving that way for us. (Graduate interview 6)

Notably, reflections on vulnerability within the context of non-Indigenous tutor and First Nations psychology student relationships (see Section 5.2.3) also pointed to the levelling effect of talking about shared difficulties on establishing connection, trust, and relatability.

5.2.2 Provision of core support: Opportunities enabling engagement and balance

The theme "Provision of core support" emphasised how student aspiration and agency were facilitated when their basic needs were met. Difficulties satisfying these contributed to stress that was at best distracting and at worst debilitating for students' academic progress, while resources that provided core support enabled better engagement with course requirements and better balance of broader wellbeing needs. Elements of this theme related to student prioritisation of their physical and mental health; capacity to

reduce financial pressure and accommodation concerns; and the adoption of healthy, retention-focused mindsets regarding their university experience.

Prioritising self-care

Participants recognised that the capacity to support others stems from intentional self-care. Prioritising self-care throughout one's academic journey was foundational for remaining engaged with one's studies and integral to the development of professional competencies, enabling one to work well with others. Self-care involved engagement in meaningful activities that stimulated, relaxed, challenged, and refreshed participants. Martial arts, ice skating, and pet ownership were among the activities mentioned. Socialising with family and community members, connecting with Country, and participating in other culturally significant activities also served to ensure that student wellbeing was maintained and nurtured. Diverse activities provided important outlets for the stress associated with deadlines that would otherwise be all-consuming in the competitive and demanding context of their psychology studies:

> As far as your wellbeing goes, in order to be a healer, of course, you've got to go through your own healing journey. So, if this is a field you want to be in, study is very important, but again we've got the supports here as safety nets—you need to learn how you look after yourself as well while you're going through that journey. (Student interview 6)

Several participants acknowledged that engaging with a psychologist helped them navigate the cumulative responsibility of multiple roles and responsibilities:

> I also have my own psychologist, who has been incredibly helpful in helping me maintain my sanity and helping me navigate the complexity of what it means to be a student, a daughter, a staff member, a friend. You're like, everything. (Student interview 5)

Engagement with established friendship networks enabled participants to gain perspective, receive encouragement, and share success. Self-care worked well when it was practised regularly and made part of daily life. However, it was easy to find excuses to neglect self-care or place university work and deadlines first. Building opportunities for self-care into a daily routine, albeit small or at times inconvenient, served to foster healthy practices that enabled students to slow down during an otherwise hectic university journey. As one graduate remarked, it was important that students found what worked to "refill their cup" (Graduate interview 5).

Self-care involved deciding to make oneself available for support. It was also important that efforts to promote wellbeing were acknowledged in order to reinforce the likelihood of their continuation. Consciously monitoring one's wellbeing encouraged the mindset for students that they were worthwhile and worthy of positive attention. Framing self-care in this way served to counter thoughts of unworthiness and self-doubt that could otherwise spiral into thoughts of withdrawing from study:

> So, I think that was a really important part of my wellbeing in many ways, right, you know, a safe person to talk to. If I was struggling either school-wise, home-wise, you know, emotion-wise, a safe person to just say, like … you know, this is what's happening with me. I can be completely honest and trust that you're going to help me figure it out right. So, I think that was a really important part of getting through. (Graduate interview 1)

Studying psychology at university is a long-term commitment, requiring resources that allow students to be available to complete numerous and varied demands. Students identified financial pressure as a primary source of stress. Help with resource support applications was valued, as was guidance relating to assessments and scholarships. Students appreciated staff support with job applications and for help engaging with disability and equity initiatives. Scholarship assistance reduced worry and provided some students with an unfamiliar level of financial stability from which they could better engage with their postgraduate journeys. Regular funding opportunity notifications were appreciated, as was news of other resources that could assist students with cost-of-living expenses:

> I'm on a scholarship for my PhD that knocks out most of the things out of the way of having to work or having to worry about finances. You know, my family has always had to worry about [finances]. [The scholarship gave] a level of financial stability I hadn't really had before, which is huge. It just made such a difference to not have to worry about it. (Student interview 8)

While opportunities to access core support were appreciated and impactful, one student acknowledged they had been unable to obtain any support themselves. Competition, it seems, was also a feature of securing financial assistance.

Balance through boundary setting

Ensuring availability for their studies required students to negotiate their availability to other responsibilities and obligations. This was challenging, but a necessity if they were to establish boundaries enabling them to compartmentalise their time and priorities, at least for the duration of their studies:

> somewhere along the line, I think we all have some experience where we say that stuff's just not worth your time. And I think what we're saying is, that thing itself is not worth your time. But we're also starting to build up an ability to say, I only have so much time and I'm going to spend it on this thing or this thing, this small selection of stuff. (Graduate interview 4)

Maintaining balance was supported by cultivating a mindset that enabled students to distinguish between priorities that warranted their focus and those that were less critical or secondary to their studies. Communicating the demands of the moment with family and community members was useful in alerting them to the impact that studying would have on their usual availability. Although this was a difficult conversation for some students, raising the issue with significant others helped manage the expectations placed on them during their time at university, and strengthened some partnerships to unite in the resolve to support the person while they were studying:

> I think I'll simply say that it can be—it can be a hard road, and balancing, you know, all your personal as well as community obligations, as well as studying, can sometimes be very overwhelming and difficult. Don't give up on your own personal goals. So, if your goal is to get through, get your degree, do what you can. Get that support. Get advice, get whatever it is you need to get you through it, and you come out the other end. (Student interview 6)

Checking student "readiness"

Support was most useful when it occurred within a "window of tolerance" (support person interview 3) for students. This acknowledged that it was not only the quality or amount of support offered, but the timing of its delivery that was important. An urge to assist or intervene on student matters must be tempered by an acknowledgement that students also have agency in this process. Mindfulness in this context involves attentiveness to student readiness to engage with support. Doing so required adjustment on behalf of one tutor to amend the pace of their interactions to meet the student at a time at which receptiveness to academic guidance was optimal:

> Different people have different readiness or things to share about their lives. And so, I would encourage or say that I think support people should have an interest getting to know the individual and then, actually, the other stuff follows. (Support person interview 3)

An important element of initial contact was recognising that some students required time to engage with assistance. Students may feel bombarded by enthusiastic outreach and switch off to the array of materials and people seeking to support their studies:

> having that automatic outreach, in a sense, was just so confusing, especially to someone who's never been to this university before and going through these massive life changes. (Student interview 2)

Consideration of how additional information was provided in unfamiliar situations required a balance to be struck between support and readiness. Students may require time to become accustomed to a context comprised of staff devoted to their successful transition to university. Opportunities to engage may be offered, while leaving space and time for students to approach. The response of some students to unfamiliar forms of support indicated that implementing a range of strategies may be particularly beneficial during the transition to university. Leaving the welcome mat out and the door open to ongoing interaction and support opportunities may provide the kind of context that First Nations students use immediately, or eventually.

Students were also encouraged to reflect on their current position in their academic journey to appreciate the incremental gains achieved and not be disheartened or distracted by concerns about how things may or may not turn out. Adopting this type of focus served to reduce the likelihood of becoming overwhelmed by the longer journey through being appreciative of what was occurring in the moment:

> one of the things that I guess I learnt in my time was something that a lecturer said to me in my first year as an undergrad. He said, “if you are here, about to undertake your psychology journey, thinking that you’re waiting for that moment when you get to the end of it, you are going to have a long, hard road”. But he said, “try as best you can to get as much out of what’s going on for you right now, you are learning right here and now”. (Graduate interview 3)

5.2.3 Participation in mindful interactions: Opportunities to develop meaningful relationships

Students encounter many different people and situations during their academic journey. Some of these are particularly meaningful and significant for their academic progress. Such experiences affirm their sense of worth and belonging within their course and among those they meet. Intentional and mindful interactions foster deeper mutual understanding, establishing a foundation of trust that enables students to engage assertively and meaningfully with matters important to them. Student wellbeing was positively affected by encounters in which they were seen, heard, and treated with dignity and respect.

“Being met where I’m at”

Mindful interactions were based on the input of both those invested in maximising the opportunities to progress First Nations psychology students on their academic journey. Students acknowledged that attentiveness was a useful feature of the relationship that enabled academic and other support personnel to inquire about how a student was in that moment, and to adjust the expectations for their interaction accordingly. Non-judgemental support provided an outlet for students to discuss their concerns, including their difficulties within the course. Tutorial support demonstrated mindfulness by noticing students’ emotions and adjusting work plans accordingly:

> it goes both ways and so we both need to be invested in the relationship. And I found we’ve really clicked really well. She is just like my honours supervisor. She met me where I was at. I was really struggling for a couple of weeks, and she made the time to make sure that I was okay, just to check in and make sure that I’m staying afloat … and [I] just was able to get reassurance that I would be okay and that they would move mountains for me, if I needed it, to make sure that I could be a psychologist. They really wanted me to succeed, and I thought that that was absolutely phenomenal, because they could have very easily said, “maybe this is too much for you. Maybe you shouldn’t be here anymore”. And I was really afraid that that was going to happen, but it didn’t, so that was really good. (Student interview 5)

Venturing into the unknown waters of research saw students appreciate the attentiveness shown by their supervisors to act when they were struggling. A tutor emphasised the significance of trust in creating a relationship where student vulnerability was handled carefully. This dynamic was particularly relevant when students sought feedback on drafts, or when discussing work that that was unfinished or imperfect. It was

essential to cultivate students' confidence in presenting incomplete work and to frame this as a safe and useful practice aimed at improving the quality of their work. Mindful interactions in this context created a collaborative atmosphere that encouraged students to be vulnerable and trusting in their pursuit of better work.

Different ways of being known

Students reported several ways of framing interactions that enabled them to be met where they were at in their study journey. These different kinds of regard promoted personal, attentive, and relational interactions that gave space for students to speak from and about their realities and the wellbeing needs they felt required attention at that time.

As a person, not a number

Students shared how valuable it was to have people with whom they could speak freely about their needs, concerns, and achievements. Students appreciated interactions in which they were regarded as a person and not treated as a number:

> especially having built the rapport with a lot of the lecturers, that's huge. I feel like as well it's having the rapport with lecturers, getting to know the lecturer, and them getting to know you as a "student person", as opposed to a "student number". (Student interview 2)

For some students, their consideration as a person involved their adoption of a pragmatically defiant approach to ensuring their concerns were heard. Consequential agency was demonstrated when interactions led to changes in the educational setting. For example, student feedback resulted in the development of guidelines regarding the inclusion of an Acknowledgement of Country in their presentation assessments. The time taken to include an acknowledgement would no longer reduce the time allowed, meaning that all students would retain the full allotment of time for their presentation. This adjustment demonstrated staff responsiveness to a student concern and commitment to enabling culturally respectful responses to assessment tasks. Students noted that such attention and subsequent action exemplified respect for them as First Nations students, and they were appreciative for the thoughtful consideration given to their concerns:

> There were definitely bad experiences as well. But when I provided feedback on these bad experiences, they were actioned and treated seriously, and things happened that they informed me about and things like that. I guess it created more belonging, right? Like, just respect for me as a human being, rather than just someone that's a student that knows nothing who is attending the university. (Graduate interview 5)

As a student, not a client

An observation was shared about how the student-lecturer dynamic may be framed by some staff as a client-therapist encounter. Concern was expressed about whether this way of regarding student concerns affected the approach taken by staff to address concerns as a matter of workplace safety, as opposed to a therapeutic intervention addressing individual limitations:

> most of them are psychologists and they treat students more like a client-therapist relationship, quite often, than a lecturer-student relationship, a workplace relationship. And so often I find when racist things are said or problematic things, discriminatory things and so forth, they treat them like they're a client who said that in a therapy session, which is a world apart from being with a lecturer in a professional environment. It is a world apart. The approaches are worlds apart, the responsibilities, the power dynamics are worlds apart. (Student interview 10)

As a community member and a student

A well-rounded regard for First Nations students acknowledged their multiple roles and responsibilities within and outside of their course. A student spoke of the "constant tension" emerging from a supervision context whereby their community-appropriate interaction was not seen as demonstrating professional competence. The student described how the need to have their placement approved affected how they interacted as a community member in order to pass the assessment. The student proposed that greater First Nations representation in supervision processes could address this predicament by enabling consideration of their actions as a community member as valid and within the bounds of acceptable service provision:

> Here you are as a professional, having to participate in these professional environments, but then you are also here as a community member. And because I think people don't talk about that enough, is when you're a community member and when you hold responsibilities in certain organisations, you do have to advocate … and it's kind of like, which one's more important right now? Is it my community responsibility or is it my professional responsibility? (Student interview 3)

Tender-hearted approaches

A tutor described how their academic support incorporated emotional attentiveness as well as academic engagement with their students. Appropriate disclosure on behalf of the tutor was used to establish connection and to demonstrate that encounters with difficulty were a normal part of the academic journey but were also challenges that could be met and overcome. Appropriate tutor disclosure of their own experience of a unit or assignment was part of an approach that showed students that a staff member could relate to their emotional and academic circumstances and that progression was possible. Treating students with dignity—especially during times at which they felt most vulnerable—was an important feature of tender-hearted tutorial support strategies:

> I think maybe I'm just being quite emotional and drawing things together, but I think obviously there's the academic support for sure that's needed. That's a given. But you see these students, you know, four to six hours a week, maybe even more. And you're texting them or e-mailing them and little bits of life drop out of those conversations. Sometimes a lot and it's certainly been my experience—because it's been my personal experience as well—that to get through, you need to get through these units, and we all just need a bit of love, and we need that wellbeing and that emotional

> support and we need someone to go “yeah, I struggled too. But I’m good and I got through it and so will you”. (Support person interview 6)

Reading the room

Participants noted that some of the challenges encountered by First Nations students were carelessly expressed ideas in the classroom, with no apparent concern for the effect this had on students. Issues were discussed as though they were occurring “out there” and not reflective of the lived experience of students in the room. Insensitive or inappropriate references to particular topics or issues were challenging for some students in ways that saw them retreating from involvement or questioning their ongoing engagement in their course. This was not necessarily a call to limit discussion of potentially uncomfortable topics, but rather to encourage consideration of how discussion and understanding is facilitated within the classroom:

> It could be, like, any of those things to never make it seem like it’s only outside the room and it’s those “other” people … so, trying to always remember that it’s very likely, in fact almost definite, that [issue, concern, or experience] is actually in the room with us, and to try and be much more sensitive to the way that it’s being approached and to talk about the role psychology has in it, rather than talking about anything in a way that’s othering or deficit perspective only, or a negative perspective only. (Support person interview 8)

Improving the representation of First Nations issues in psychology curricula does not merely involve increasing the amount of content provided. It also invites examination of the sophistication required to deliver quality learning opportunities for everyone in the room. Development of the andragogy for teaching First Nations psychology students is an important step towards the construction of approaches that are safe and appealing. Teaching approaches may provide incremental exposure to increasingly complex scenarios that enable students to develop their competence and confidence over time. Attention to where students are positioned and developing activities to progress them appropriately should underpin emerging andragogy in this space. Beyond evaluating the quality of classroom content, participants also addressed how the facilitation of material could be managed in ways that affirmed their cultural identity and mediated stereotypical or racist assertions from other class members or academic staff:

> The team approach is actually good, so we … [ask] how do we teach this stuff to begin with students in the first year, as opposed to somebody [who] was a little bit more experienced than first year? A gentle approach. Starting with something easier to deal with, maybe, in the first year, then something maybe a bit more confrontational or something harder. (Support person interview 4)

Academic staff play an important role in orienting First Nations students to the assessment expectations of psychology courses. Following a poor assessment outcome, a participant spoke of their appreciation of the guidance provided by their unit coordinator, who explained how the writing style in psychology differed from that taught in a previous course they had completed. The dividend on that advice was the student expressing that, “once I’d sort of gotten past that little hurdle, then I was fine. Like

everything was smooth sailing" (graduate interview 6). Assisting students in comprehending the writing conventions relevant to their course served to reinforce their alignment with the professional standards expected within their field and prevented them drifting too far off course. Constructive feedback and encouraging results also communicated to students that they could meet course expectations, which in turn enhanced their confidence to continue and their likelihood of seeking help for future problems. A relatively small yet attentive and mindful interaction had a significant effect on this student and their ongoing engagement in their course.

Sharing vulnerability as the basis for trust

Addressing student concerns and maintaining engagement were important features of effective tutoring. It was valuable to reassure students that encountering challenges was common, and that tutors draw on their own experiences to offer guidance and build resilience. Emphasising shared experiences and illustrating how difficulties could be overcome helped foster trust and normalised collaborative problem solving. It also reduced students' sense of isolation or concern that they were the only person having trouble with assessment tasks:

> it seems like a small thing, but it really was a constant topic that we came back to because obviously we've done the same units, we're in the same place, and there were certain units and certain assignments. But it was whenever, I guess, I let down that boundary of like, "oh no, when I did this, I really struggled with it as well, and my assignment was a bit different to this, but I obviously can relate". And, you know, she [a student] would struggle with a certain section, and I go "no, you're not alone". I was exactly the same, but I can tell you what I've learnt from that, and hopefully that would help. (Support person interview 6)

Disclosures like these reduced power imbalances between tutors and students. Students often assumed tutors had always achieved exceptional grades and would be unable to relate to poorer results or students having difficulties. By revealing their own academic struggles, tutors demonstrated that they were knowledgeable but not perfect, and experienced but not necessarily experts, enabling them to connect through their collaborative overcoming of common struggles.

The risks of bridge-building

A lecturer described the tension of being caught between the desire to help and the uncertainty of how best to help as "uncomfortable", comparing it to walking on quicksand—a scenario where they saw their attempts to move as uncertain and risky:

> that idea that if you stand still in quicksand, you don't die, essentially, if you just stand still. But when you start moving, you're more likely going to sink. So, I feel like that's probably as close a metaphor as I can get, because I feel like if I move towards you to try and support you, there are more ways I can—and this is probably overstating it—but I feel like there are more ways that I can be offensive than potentially I can be useful and supportive. So, I might actually just drown in this quicksand by trying to do the right thing. But if I stay still, I haven't offended yet that I'm aware of, and I probably, you know, can maintain a facade of, well, I'm open-

> minded, I understand, and if I just stand in the quicksand and just do the bare minimum of what I'm supposed to do, it then looks supportive and looks appropriate, but I'm not doing anything meaningful to get out of the quicksand or to even try to help. (Support person interview 1)

Tutors, lecturers, and unit coordinators acknowledged the need for communication bridges to be built between themselves and First Nations students but described the difficulty they sometimes felt in attempting to do so. The desire to do good things was tempered by the fear of being offensive or inappropriate, creating an impasse that saw some staff trying to do just enough to demonstrate their allyship or doing nothing at all for fear of sinking in their uncomfortable predicament. The resulting paralysis impeded development of effective academic relationships and showed the difficulty of attempting to build bridges on quicksand:

> Because if you get it wrong, it makes you less likely to do it again, right? That's human nature. We don't touch an electric wire again if it's given us a shock. Right. So, it makes you very cautious. It gives you this sort of like treading on eggshells kind of feeling, but it's not how you want to be. It's like avoidance behaviour, isn't it? Which is definitely not how I want to teach. And so, my approach has therefore been to avoid those situations, I guess, and just sort of acknowledge that all students have specific needs. (Support person interview 5)

Attention to the allyship experience revealed that it is a process fraught with doubt and tentativeness for students and staff. Although staff members were willing to demonstrate their support for First Nations psychology students, they remained hesitant due to the critical feedback they felt they would attract by doing something inappropriate or destructive. Just as students worried about approaching others for support, the experience for some support providers reflected their uncertainties about assisting and a comparable prioritisation of their own self-preservation. This may reduce opportunities to create and participate in mindful interactions and result instead in mutually wary parties unable to take a first step towards useful communication. In the interests of developing opportunities for students and staff to communicate well, efforts to address the foundations of good interactions should be discussed and sought. The benefits of doing so were reported in the Project and showed that mindful interactions and good relationships built on respectful foundations were possible and impactful for all involved.

5.2.4 Development of consequential agency: Opportunities to lead and influence

The theme "Development of consequential agency" describes how First Nations psychology students engage purposefully with the social and physical features of their university settings to overcome challenges, make the most of meaningful opportunities, and influence change to elevate the positive experience of studying psychology for themselves and others. Student agency reflects engagement-focused mindsets resulting in retention-focused action, cultivated and nurtured over time. Growth of consequential agency sees students develop self-determination and intentionality in their actions, aligned with the emerging vision of their study and professional aspirations.

Trailblazing and taking control

Deliberately and intentionally surrounding themselves with good resources was an initiative students took to facilitate their academic progress. While finding the right fit with the range of supports available often took time, the effort to do so proved life-changing in some instances in terms of the impact of such decisions on the student journey:

> I think everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses, and I think sometimes applying for uni doesn't really consider that at times. That's probably been my experience, and I think for me it was a lot of trial and error. The minute that I got a tutor through the Indigenous engagement office, that changed my life, if that makes sense. Absolutely changed my life, because it was just that I needed reassurance that I could do it … But I think that identifying that there was no one way to do uni, in that everyone is different, and finding your own little unique way of making it work is really helpful. And that's something that I recommend to everyone, with whatever supports that [are] available, is to use it. And it's not a bad thing. It's a way to connect with others. (Student interview 3)

Developing consequential agency often required students to step out of their comfort zone to identify and engage with resources that aligned with and supported their needs and preferences. Asserting control over one's journey in this way revealed untapped student capacities for problem solving and ingenuity:

> As I reflect on the times I could have quit, maybe should have quit, it's not even a possibility, it's never come up that I would do that because I was so driven by what I wanted to do, that I just found another way around it. (Graduate interview 5)

The development of agency with one's journey signalled growing self-leadership, with resilient and engagement-focused mindsets enabling students to adapt to large and small contextual demands:

> and seeking support, I think, to do your journey, whether it's through the university or through your own families or through your community. Yeah. Staying connected and grounded during that process, I think, is important to maintain because it's really easy to drop out. (Student interview 3)

First Nations psychology students discovered or created pathways that enabled them to achieve their desired academic goals. This involved patience with what could not be changed, and planning and commitment to continue to progress despite challenges. Key to developing agency was a realisation that students were part of the university and educational environment, and capable of becoming influential in that space and deliberate in the decisions that would enable them to continue their journey:

> "flourishing"—that's just not something that happens unless people or a person realises that they are actually part of that broader ecosystem. None of us are walking around without … some kind of impact on the world around us. It's just whether we realise it or not. And then when you realise it, you know, then you can actually start to have some intentionality around those things. (Graduate interview 4)

First Nations psychology students adopted mindsets supportive of their choice to remain engaged. Learning what things were important occurred over time and accompanied a burgeoning awareness that students could be impactful:

> I can honestly say I never, ever thought about withdrawing from a course or anything because of something someone else does. It just doesn't make sense to me. I'm there for different reasons than that, and I don't need somebody else to be decent to me to continue. There's got to be something pretty damn egregious (Graduate interview 4)

Pragmatic choices and practical progress towards better gardens

Students demonstrated initiative by making strategic choices about how they engaged during different stages of their education journey. They were pragmatic in how they responded to their settings, recognising when the timing or capacity of the environment was not conducive to the fulfilment of their interests:

> I think it was definitely a degree of strategic thinking to where I wanted to go, and within that sentiment of, "I'll get to the work I want to do later" and "this garden is not going to give me the opportunity to do the work that I want to do, but I'll get to that garden later. I'll get to that kind of work later". So, I think you had to have that vision in mind, that almost like an acceptance base that this is not satisfying. This doesn't fill me culturally, this doesn't fill me with love and joy, but I have hope. I'm going to be able to get to where I need to go if I just keep persisting, and I now call it "going through the colonial hoops" that you need to get through to get where you want to be. (Graduate interview 1)

Students decided activities and relationships that nourished their aspirations or allowed them to bide their time until more favourable conditions arose. Students made the best of non-preferred situations, accruing knowledge and skills that they could eventually deploy on their actual passions:

> So, I picked a supervisor who was warm, available, had a great track record with other students of a good honours experience. They had a lab with resources that could help you through. They had PhD students who would help you through your honours. So, I ended up doing a project that I had zero interest in whatsoever, but it had all the conditions that could help me get to where I needed to go. (Graduate interview 1)

Students encouraged other students to be proactive when engaging with the resources in order to get the most out of them. Prior preparation helped turn general opportunities into bespoke discussions:

> Before I went back to uni, I actually went to the postgrad psych info night. Yeah, I went in proper prepared this time and knew about all of the stuff. An APS rep was coming and gave me a talk about pathways. I attended that so I made sure that I engaged and knew about all of that. (Graduate interview 2)

Practical adjustments improved student engagement in tutorials and lectures and demonstrated that significant differences could be made with small moves. For example, a student reported how they had appeared unprepared to answer a question directed at them during a class discussion. This felt uncomfortable and left the student wondering if this would lead to them retreating from subsequent interactions, or whether there were opportunities to address a similar scenario more constructively in the future. The student chose the second option and found that sitting at the front of the classroom and removing other distractions were practical ways that helped them improve their engagement in classroom discussion, and reduced the likelihood that they would appear unprepared if another question about the content was directed at them:

> But I thought, if I'm at the front of the room, I'll feel less anxious if I'm called upon, so I sort of addressed it like that. And I made sure I didn't have my phone near me, you know. So, I just made sure that I didn't have any distractions or tried to as much as possible. And yeah, I mean, it never happened again. But yeah, I just thought about ways in which I can help myself within that situation if I was put in that situation again. (Graduate interview 6)

Rethinking assumptions about what works best for First Nations students

The decisions and actions taken by First Nations psychology students to navigate their academic journey revealed strategies that challenged prevailing assumptions about which approaches were most effective for First Nations learners. Just as students arrived at university along different paths, so too the discovery of what worked best for them revealed individual, and sometimes counterintuitive, preferences. For one PhD graduate, useful support had been more a case of quality over quantity. Useful support was obtained from one of their supervisors in particular, who, over time, had worked with them to establish an efficient and collegial relationship:

> I never really had a great deal of reason to engage with any particular support mechanisms. I don't think I actually ever went to, you know, as a [university] student, I don't think I ever went to [the Indigenous studies centre] for support, actually ever. If I'm being honest, you know, I found [my PhD supervisor] to be the most helpful person that I could possibly think of. (Graduate interview 4)

On further reflection, the participant interrogated assumptions about what worked best for First Nations psychology students, calling for greater sophistication in the thinking that informs many prevailing support strategies. Reliance on certain assumptions about what should work to support First Nations psychology students may force them into unproductive and inappropriate associations and restrict them from engaging with resource opportunities beyond those presumed to be effective:

> "Indigeneity" is not support. Having another Aboriginal person there is not support. Having cultural stuff and symbols is not support. There's something far deeper to that now. They might be part of it, and they could be supportive. But the assumption that they are is, I think, a hugely incorrect one. And I don't mean that in a disparaging, disrespectful way to people who see those things as really useful, because they can be. But I

> don’t think they’re sufficient to just provide the experience that any and every student needs … it’s almost as though we intentionally blinker ourselves from possibilities and we’ve refined something down to “got to be Indigenous or else it doesn’t work”. I don’t agree. (Graduate interview 4)

Another student described the inspirational supervision provided by their Indigenous and non-Indigenous supervisors. The study expectations helped identify the human and other resources best suited to support the student at that time and in that setting. Reliance on support that was assumed to work because of long-held or unexamined presumptions was not necessarily the best or preferred approach for specific student needs. First Nations psychology students flourished because of the influence they were able to exert over the support networks established for their success:

> I’ve got a fantastic non-Indigenous supervisor. She’s an angel and a staunch ally and has always been the best advocate that I could ever ask for in this space. So, she was a huge reason why I would stick here. And, you know, they both set the example as to, you know, how to conduct myself and how to keep passing it on. (Student interview 1)

5.2.5 Displays of interest beyond the individual: Opportunities to dream and reciprocate

Displays of interest beyond the individual were demonstrated in two ways—through First Nations psychology students’ intentions to work for the benefit of others, and by psychology course attributes acknowledging student aspirations and Indigenous community needs. By considering wellbeing issues important to First Nations students and valuing their priorities in psychology, there was clear demonstration of genuine positive regard through representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewpoints in psychology and demonstrating support for students' goals to graduate and positively contribute to their families and communities.

Supporting the wellbeing and success of First Nations psychology students extended beyond their personal academic journeys. The choice to study psychology—and to persist through its challenges—was often linked to commitments given to serve community, and the desire to follow in the footsteps of inspirational family members and other role models. Students described their studies as a pathway to roles where they could positively influence the social and emotional wellbeing of other First Nations peoples and persevered through their studies—sometimes to the detriment of their own wellbeing.

Fulfilling collective obligations to progress together

A strong sense of obligation and responsibility to support other First Nations psychology students was a central feature of many student yarns. Some considered it a feature of longstanding collectivist culture to do so, while others wished to emulate the support they had received from others in their own academic journey. Psychology was viewed as a stepping stone towards ambitions that were not necessarily therapeutically or clinically focused. Participants noted the value of psychology to provide them with a grounding to

pursue academic, research, and policy development work. A message of shared journeys and shared destinations helped reinforce the collective potential of interconnected and cumulative academic achievement to enhance the relevance of psychology for First Nations people and the representation of First Nations people within the profession:

> Having the opportunity to change our community outcomes for the better is a powerful responsibility to have on your shoulders. And remember that they're never there alone. They are here with us. We are here for them. Yes, there's Indigenous student services, but you have mob here who excel and can show the way, can show you the path of success in psychology specifically. Say, "we're here with you. We got you". And then if all else fails, give them that visual reminder—that they have tens of thousands of years of ancestral strength and resilience and survival supporting them through this journey as well. (Student interview 1)

Displays of support for the interests of individual students were a powerful way of ensuring that community needs for social and emotional wellbeing work were addressed:

> I'm feeling that responsibility to make sure that community people are being heard. So, one of the wonderful things about doing this PhD and, you know, doing research in general, [is] it's a way I can get the voices of the community into this world, into an academic level, where it has weight. (Student interview 6)

The normalisation of Indigenous knowledges was viewed as an important destination. Greater inclusion of content positively influences the wellbeing of First Nations psychology students, enhances overall awareness and safety among psychologists, and offers international students valuable perspectives on First Nations' cultures:

> We've got a lot of good universities right around Australia that are that way. And I think that's wonderful. We need more of them though, and it's going to take a bit of time. Indigenous knowledges, I think, are going to be a big challenge for the future, I think, for universities and actually embedding them as a part of what is normally known, thought, and understood within the university sector. And our Elders, of course, can help us do that. (Graduate interview 3)

Students described wanting to embody an unstoppable worldview so that they could thrive and feel empowered to experience and improve the world for others important to them. Other students felt the need to remain brave in their studies, especially if support was not readily forthcoming. It was important to not "let the academic part of things scare you and put you off. No matter what age you are. Think of the overall passion, why you started, and you'll get there. That's what I keep telling myself" (student interview 4). For some students, their contribution meant finding and sharing the lessons learnt from their own unpleasant experience:

> I don't mind having to go through what I went through last year if I could find out all the supports through that to make it easier for other students coming in for their first time. It's like, I would do my first year, 2024, again if it meant that I could give all the support I've learnt now through that to other students, so basically, they don't have the first year that I had. (Student interview 9)

Participants reflected on changes they had observed over time, describing how the current moves by Australian psychology to address its relationship with First Nations people required authentic action in order to operationalise rigorous, valid, and safe strengths-based responses:

> that piece of work APAC is doing; it is going to be universities' responsibility to create culturally safe environments where culture and identity in all of its diversities are brought into our thinking of psychology. So yes, universities these days do have a lot to answer for. Back in the day, when I was studying, it was not their mandate to care about that. But it is their mandate soon. (Graduate interview 1)

Input from motivated, knowledgeable, and articulate First Nations psychology students and graduates driven by the desire to improve and promote the life circumstances of other First Nations people could do much to lead and synergise the efforts of the profession in this regard.

<u>The ripple effect of supporting First Nations psychology students</u>

The genuine inclusion of First Nations psychology students has benefits beyond the individual. Support for First Nations psychology students is likely to have a ripple effect on the wellbeing of many of their family and community members and comprises an important focal point for professional changes relating to the regard for First Nations issues by all profession members. The participants noted that support and understanding from others had grown alongside their progress in their course. Appreciation for psychology had changed through what family and community members learnt about psychology via the participation of their student family member:

> So, it is really critically important that everybody's culturally safe, that we're not just producing Aboriginal psychologists to be culturally safe with Aboriginal people, that all people are culturally safe to be working with Aboriginal people. (Student interview 10)

Growing the cohort of First Nations psychology students has the concurrent benefits of supporting a better understanding of the utility of the profession and its representatives for First Nations people and improving the capacity and confidence of allies in this endeavour. Framing equity initiatives as having broad-based benefit may be a more accurate way of promoting their worthiness and necessity in university systems. Although equity is often perceived as serving individuals within narrowly defined groups, its long-term and broader impact is likely far more extensive than any individual student achievement, as one participant highlighted: "I think I would like to see our university is known for being a culturally safe place for everybody—and I mean everybody, not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people" (graduate interview 3).

6. Discussion

6.1 Wellbeing is an important part of the academic journey

> while obviously not the only indicator, graduation can also be seen as a measure of the success of retention strategies, including the cultural relevance of programs, the cultural safety of the program, school and higher education institution, and the cultural, social and academic support of students. (Dudgeon et al., 2016)

“Success” in higher education looks different and means different things to each student. While graduation may seem like the ultimate goal and sign of achievement, Dudgeon et al.’s (2016) observation highlights that much needs to occur prior to that endpoint. Increasing the number of First Nations students requires attention to what sparks their interest in psychology, what facilitates their entrance into university and attendance in their classes, what supports them through their undergraduate and postgraduate programs, and how the success of those steps enables them to use the knowledge and skills gained through their consistent engagement. The First Nations Psychology Student Wellbeing Research Project has sought to improve our understanding of those “upstream” conditions.

The Findings are supportive of previous efforts to articulate which factors affect the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students beyond their initial enrolment (Taylor et al., 2019). While improving access to university constitutes a crucial element in the higher education journey for First Nations students, attention is also required to ensure that their experience at university is both safe and fulfilling. Greater First Nations student enrolment at university is mitigated by the reality that many students struggle to complete their degrees (Oliver et al., 2015). It is short-sighted and arguably unethical to remain focused on simply getting students through the door and into university (Hearn & Kenna, 2021)—particularly if what awaits them on the other side is a stressful and alienating experience, with an expensive entrance fee. Understanding the predictors of wellbeing at different stages of the university experience is vital for ensuring student support services are tailored appropriately (Brett et al., 2023), value the student, validate the student’s presence, and are offered by approachable and attentive support personnel (Belando-Montoro et al., 2022). Such concerns apply specifically to the attraction, retention, and graduation of First Nations students from psychology courses at Australian universities (Dudgeon et al., 2016).

It is acknowledged that the development of cultural responsiveness and competencies relevant to the effective and appropriate recruitment, retention, and graduation of First Nations students is an ongoing journey, rather than a defined destination (Dudgeon et al., 2016). Attention to how participants account for these transitions is important in conceptualising the university site for First Nations psychology students, and it is timely that information be obtained to address professional questions and convey community

needs while on this journey. This project aimed to be a source of such information for First Nations psychology students. Current and former students possess direct experience with the educational system and its personnel and can provide valuable feedback regarding how these structures either facilitate or hinder their academic progress and cultural responsibilities. Questions about the suitability of content and activities relevant to improved psychological services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients would benefit from attentively considering the comprehensive and thoughtful insights offered by First Nations students and contribute to the “decolonial turn” in psychology (Gibson et al., 2025).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021) identified that “too much work”, “caring for family members”, “waiting to hear from education facility”, and “too expensive/financial reasons” were the predominant reasons that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 20 years and over did not pursue a/another educational qualification. The findings in this project suggest that the factors that prevent First Nations people from considering further education may persist as burdens on the wellbeing of those who decide to proceed. This raises the fundamental question of how universities can play a role in supporting the integrity of the threads that comprise and contribute to the fabric of First Nations psychology student wellbeing. The attainment of higher education qualifications need not compromise the wellbeing of those set on navigating a university journey. This is not to diminish the challenge and transformation that genuine engagement in rigorous academic activity inherently involves to develop suitably qualified graduates. However, there is good reason to ensure that opportunity to participate in the challenge is non-discriminatory, equitable, and attentive to those who may benefit from an opportunity to be involved and in turn benefit the profession and the people with whom they seek to work.

Converting enrolment numbers into graduation statistics requires a conceptualisation of university that ensures the focus is expanded to include improving student retention and completion rates, and the quality of their engagement and experiences at university during their higher education journeys (Andersen et al., 2016). Efforts to address disparities in retention and graduation have targeted curricular changes, including the incorporation of Indigenous knowledges, greater numbers of First Nations staff to support and teach students, and the development of culturally valid resources for First Nations students (Dudgeon et al., 2016). Improvement measures should also address institutional and classroom impediments to study and developing environments that are conducive to student engagement and cultural safety (Fredericks et al., 2024), staffed by receptive and culturally competent personnel. Integral too are processes to increase the relevance of the curriculum and pedagogy for serving the needs of Indigenous people, thereby increasing the engagement of Indigenous students (Harris et al., 2012). The findings from this project support the need for ongoing engagement with these elements in the context of psychology courses specifically.

It is important to bear in mind that elements that influence and affect student success are likely to be complex and depend on factors beyond programs and strategies provided by universities (Hearn & Kenna, 2021). Several students acknowledged the support provided through other avenues, including various scholarships, and appreciated being notified of them and supported through their subsequent application. Generally, the availability of human resources and support personnel was appreciated,

although accessing these resources ultimately reflected the timing and needs of individual students. It may be beneficial to explore strategies that support cooperative relationships and positive interdependence between staff and students. The central message appears to be finding “what works best for you”. Discovering this is part of the academic journey for students as they navigate the interface between their backgrounds, courses, and institution. Support personnel should adopt and pursue appropriate expectations for the student, informed and guided by student readiness, through mindful interactions that enable this type of collaborative exploration of the conditions that support student success to be a focus of early and ongoing interactions between staff and students.

Universities should serve increasingly as a space where students can flourish and engage with challenging academic expectations (Bullen et al., 2023). Increasingly, the question “how can we make psychology work for us?” has become the basis of discussion regarding its place in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is a very different position to that which has historically excluded or constricted the representation of First Nations people within the profession. The exploration of possibility encourages students to engage, excel, and cultivate the discipline needed to benefit future student cohorts, their families, and their communities. Stories of student group success may come to replace narratives of individual student success against the odds.

First Nations psychology students reported seeing the potential of psychology as beneficial, and this project’s findings indicate that many are willing to navigate the discomfort of participation to achieve the knowledge and credentials that graduation provides. Their participation has in turn afforded First Nations psychology students with an insider’s view of courses and institutions. If we are interested in promoting enrolment in universities to First Nations peoples, we should be invested in the impressions communicated by First Nations students to other First Nations people. Foremost among these is the degree to which institutions and courses demonstrate genuine positive regard for the wellbeing of First Nations students while at university.

Participants expressed a need for better representation of First Nations content in psychology courses. Rather than brief mentions or portrayals that emphasised deficits or abnormality, strong encouragement was given for incorporating strengths- and solution-based material. Students were also curious about how such information was developed and raised questions about the methodologies used to create knowledge about First Nations people. Queries about conventional empiricism did not indicate disinterest in methods and techniques that supported valid understandings and good interventions. On the contrary, queries regarding knowledge production and understanding of First Nations people reflected concerns that what is known and accepted as valid and useful knowledge for First Nations people appeared to be excluded or trivialised by prevailing approaches. The main issue remains whether emergent policies and practices will be effectively implemented to help more students to get ready, get in, and get through (Bowden et al., 2019). Doing so underpins a change to the prevailing mythology and narrative around university experience from one describing an individual’s struggle within impenetrable systems, to cohorts flourishing within responsive settings. Additionally, incorporation of Indigenous knowledges should be regarded as an addition

and complement to Australian psychology, rather than detractive or threatening to the profession.

Oliver et al. (2015) identified the need to highlight Indigenous student strengths and pointed to this as an area of study that is fundamental in changing attitudes towards Aboriginal tertiary students and Aboriginal people, and recommended future research focus on the motivation and determination of Aboriginal students. This recommendation highlights the opportunity to recognise and acknowledge students as influential in managing their wellbeing, and not merely passive in the face of contextual demands. Gilmore et al. (2025a) saw further specific research through this lens as leading to practical insights into the ways that universities could reform settings to better support student wellbeing. Thus, understanding wellbeing requires a holistic appreciation of the individual in context, and the capacity for an individual to both influence and be influenced by the characteristics of their surroundings and their experience of them.

Equity and cultural safety appear well aligned in terms of their regard for the student experience and the broader systemic features that influence that experience at university, although their influence may be contested—particularly during periods where First Nations perspectives are diminished. Participants in this project noted that wellbeing is valued and that success is linked to strategically overcoming academic and broader social challenges. The Project urges further attention be devoted to First Nations students' wellbeing at university and argues that substantive advancement rests on dignified engagement with both general and specific elements of the wellbeing experience that is attentive to the prevailing sociohistorical conditions.

However, an access and equity focus alone will not lead to social justice for First Nations peoples within the higher education system, as universities in Australia continue to be "places of white habitus where race capital ensures reproduction of white privilege" (Andersen, 2018). Brett et al. (2023) asserted that interventions designed to improve student resilience and coherence, and reduce loneliness and perceived stress, are likely to enhance the wellbeing of student populations. This may well be a necessary approach for the here and now, as university and psychology course settings contend with transforming into sites of collective student flourishing, in addition to individual student coping.

Further, several participants reported an uneasy association with the equity "label" and the associated critique around what is viewed as special treatment of First Nations students. In fact, the expectations felt by some Indigenous students to engage with equity measures and supports negatively affected their wellbeing. In no way did students wish to disrespect, seem ungrateful for, or deny the provision of such resources for themselves or other First Nations students. Nor did they express any desire to undertake an educational experience that could be viewed as being "less" or inferior to any others. However, while promotion and awareness of resources should be apparent, engagement with resources should remain at the choice and discretion of First Nations students. There should be no negative stigma attached to their provision or use, or to the decision by some students to decline them. The self-determination and agency associated with either choice aligns with student demonstration of purpose and control of their academic and professional destinies.

6.2 Research limitations

6.2.1 Additional insights from students who withdrew from psychology

Further insight into the experience and role of wellbeing for First Nations students in the context of university may be achieved by engaging the perspectives of those who have withdrawn from psychology, changed courses, or left university altogether. Yarning with those who have stepped away from psychology could deepen our understanding of what is appealing or off-putting about the discipline, the settings in which it is delivered, and the interplay of how wellbeing opportunities affect their choice or capacity to continue.

6.2.2 Improved focus on intersectional experiences and wellbeing

The Project employed semi-structured research yarns to enable participants to speak freely about their wellbeing and university experience. Students and graduates emphasised what they saw as important elements of their experience; however, future research may seek to purposively obtain perspectives that foreground the intersectionality of location, identity, gender, age, and wellbeing in university settings with remote/very remote students, LGBTQIA+SB students, students with a disability, and mature-aged carers.

6.2.3 Expanded consideration of support roles and research sites

Support personnel perspectives were obtained from participants with experience in different facets of the academic ecosystems that support First Nations psychology students' achievement at university. The perspectives of personnel (for example, those involved in administrative or specific wellbeing support initiatives) could be informative. Approaches were made to representatives in these roles; however, their involvement was not secured within the project timeline. The Project obtained perspectives from current and former students with experience at 12 Australian universities. Future research may seek to extend this coverage to include input from appropriate institutions from all Australian states.

6.3 Dissemination and translation of the research findings

The dissemination strategy aims to reach and inform former and current First Nations psychology students and allies, academics, and profession leaders; First Nations wellbeing researchers; and those invested in supporting the academic aspirations and trajectories of First Nations university students more broadly. Dissemination avenues include:

- the ACSES Fellowship Report
- an ACSES Fellowship Project Fact/Summary sheet

- Curtin University School of Population Health Indigenous Research Seminar (2026)
- AIPEP Community of Practice (COP) meeting (2026)
- presentation at national and international First Nations health and wellbeing conferences, such as the Australian and New Zealand Mental Health Association's Indigenous Wellbeing Conference (2026), Lowitja Institute's International Indigenous Health and Wellbeing Conference (2027), and education conferences (for example, the World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education 2028)
- presentation at the APS annual conference
- presentation at AIPA and/or Heads of Departments and Schools of Psychology Association (HoDSPA) gatherings
- journal article(s) that focus on: (1) an overview of the First Nations Psychology Student Wellbeing Research Project, and its outcomes and implications; and (2) unpacking the ally experience of First Nations psychology student support personnel.

The translation of the findings will proceed in alignment with the data and will be refined through further consultation with relevant stakeholders to determine the most effective message and resource formats.

6.4 Concluding remarks

There are positive consequences to be gained from growing psychology's efforts to address its historical engagement with First Nations people, and psychology is well placed to lead by example in pursuing such changes (Garvey, 2016). Edwige et al. (2022) observed that an evolved profession will help close the gap, improve its capacity to play a meaningful role in the social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations people, and broaden its reach and relevance to other sectors of Australian society. This shift raises questions about how emerging psychologists are best prepared to be culturally and psychologically competent practitioners, and how best to facilitate the specific presence of First Nations people within psychology. This is not only viewed as a matter of urgency, but as a matter of equity regarding the place of First Nations students in psychology courses; their movement into the profession; and the ways in which the profession seeks to continue its evolution as an attentive, responsive, and culturally safe public resource.

The findings in this project are relevant to other disciplines that experience similar challenges related to attracting, retaining, and graduating First Nations students. The emphasis on student wellbeing presented here may inform and enrich parallel efforts, offering valuable perspectives for future research and practice in comparable and different discipline settings. "Wellbeing" is an important focus and starting point to consider in efforts to support the success trajectories of First Nations psychology students. As well as current student perspectives, insights from First Nations psychology graduates and support personnel help to highlight changes over time and contemporary challenges faced in providing effective student support.

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