

**First Peoples' Perspectives on Engagement at University: What Keeps Students Coming
Back to Indigenous Education Units?**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the factors which influence First Peoples students' decisions to access and engage with GUMURRII Student Success Unit, the Indigenous Education Unit at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. Higher education plays a critical role in improving socioeconomic outcomes in First Peoples communities; however, First Peoples are underrepresented, with lower participation and higher attrition rates than non-Indigenous students. Engagement with Indigenous Education Units can improve student progression, retention and success; however, the nature of engagement with Indigenous Education Units has not been widely examined. This research adopts an interpretive case study approach using concurrent mixed methods including survey, focus groups, individual interviews, and document analysis to examine students' engagement with GUMURRII. The incorporation of Nakata's Cultural Interface and Indigenous Standpoint Theory into the research design privileged First Peoples students' voices, and allowed experiences to be shared from their perspectives. There were six clear findings identified in this study, indicating that students access and engage with GUMURRII for reasons far beyond seeking traditional forms of support. Findings include (a) making the initial connection to GUMURRII, (b) becoming part of the First Peoples' student community, (c) understanding the full resource potential of GUMURRII, and (d) knowing how to access these resources. Finally, there were (e) additional factors identified as contributing to student success, and (f) new, creative suggestions from First Peoples students that should be pursued. Through understanding why students initially access and engage with GUMURRII and continue to do so, recommendations surrounding targeted programs and opportunities that contribute to retention, progression and success of students could be made. This research could be used to not only improve First Peoples students' success and work toward parity, but more broadly

could inform university-wide support and the work of Indigenous Education Units across Australia.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Rebecca Cook

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List of abbreviations

ATF	Aboriginal Task Force
ATSITAP	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tutorial Assistance Program
AUSSE	Australasian Survey of Student Engagement
CoP	Community of Practice
G08	Group of Eight
GUMURRII	GUMURRII Student Success Unit
HDR	Higher Degree Research
IEU	Indigenous Education Unit
ITAS	Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme
NAEC	National Aboriginal Education Committee
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
SSO	Student Success Officer

Chapter 1: Introduction

This study is being conducted to meet requirements of the Master of Education and Professional Studies Research program at Griffith University. Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples (hereafter “First Peoples”) are underrepresented within Australia’s higher education sector and have lower participation, retention and success rates than non-Indigenous students. University Indigenous Education Units (IEUs) were established to address the causes of this disparity, and to assist with First Peoples’ access to higher education and their retention, progression and success at university. Low numbers of students regularly engage with IEUs or access the services and support available. As the nature of engagement with IEUs has not been widely examined, this study intends to investigate factors which influence First Peoples students’ decisions to access and engage with Griffith University’s GUMURRII Student Success Unit (GUMURRII) by taking a case study approach. Analysis of survey responses, interviews/focus groups, and document analysis will be undertaken to provide a deeper understanding of student engagement with GUMURRII. First Peoples students’ voices and perspectives will be captured by incorporating Nakata’s Cultural Interface and Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Nakata, 2002, 2006, 2007a) into the research design.

This thesis will be presented in seven chapters. The importance of this research topic and Indigenist research design will be highlighted by providing background, context, aims and significance of the study in Chapter 1 together with the research questions. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature that will emphasise phenomena which have received little attention in previous studies surrounding First Peoples’ participation in higher education, student engagement, and IEUs, revealing the need for deeper investigation into the research problem. The chapter concludes by presenting the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used for the study. The research design is detailed in Chapter 3 including methodology,

ethical considerations, site and sample selection, participants, and the instruments used. The data gathering procedure, timeline and analysis are then presented.

Findings from the online survey, and the themes that emerged from the analysis of open-ended survey questions and transcript data, are presented together with limitations of this study in Chapter 4. The six clear findings that emerged are grouped and discussed through the lens of the Cultural Interface and Indigenous Standpoint Theory in Chapter 5. Recommendations that arise from the discussion of the findings are presented in Chapter 6 together with suggestions for future research. Chapter 7 concludes this thesis by reaffirming the purpose, findings, and future applications of this study.

1.1 Background

This research aims to investigate the factors which influence First Peoples students' decisions to access and engage with the GUMURRII, the IEU at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. Existing literature has highlighted the disparity between First Peoples students' access to, participation in, and success at university (Bandias et al., 2014; Behrendt et al., 2012; Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2006). Higher attrition, and therefore lower completion, rates compared to non-Indigenous students have been documented since the 1980s (Bandias et al., 2014). Andersen et al. (2008) have argued that culturally appropriate and academically comprehensive support at university is vital for First Peoples. The establishment of IEUs has improved access, retention and success of students. Despite having support available, it is reported that approximately 30% of First Peoples students regularly access and engage with IEUs (Trudgett, 2010). Detailed responses on why and how students are using the IEU, and what keeps students engaging with it through their studies, will be facilitated through my insider position, as GUMURRII is my place of employment (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

1.2 Context

In order to contextualise this study, it is important to note previous research within the field as well as the position and context of the researcher. Numerous studies have investigated First Peoples within higher education; however, the disparity between First Peoples and non-Indigenous Australians remains. I am an Aboriginal woman; my family are descendants of the Nunukul People, one of the three clans of the Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island) Moorgumpin (Moreton Island) People who are known as the Quandamooka People, in Queensland, Australia. I was born and live on the lands of the Kombumerri People on the Gold Coast. I have completed a Bachelor of Science and a Graduate Diploma in Education (Senior Years) and am currently completing a Master of Education and Professional Studies Research. I am also employed at Griffith University in GUMURRII as a Student Success Coordinator. As an Aboriginal person working within an IEU at a higher education institution, the success of First Peoples students is central to my role and of personal interest. Furthermore, my daily experiences within the Cultural Interface (Nakata, 2002, 2006, 2007a) provide me with a unique standpoint (Moreton-Robinson, 2013) to undertake this study. It is apparent that students who display help-seeking behaviour and are engaged with GUMURRII have better outcomes than those who choose not to engage with the IEU. Over the last decade, with the development of social media and online learning, the ways in which students engage with each other and the university have evolved. Even though the university environment has changed, the need for improved First Peoples students' outcomes is still apparent. Improving participation and success of First Peoples is not only a national priority (Universities Australia, 2017): it is also in alignment with Griffith University's and GUMURRII's strategic priorities (Griffith University, 2016; 2018; 2019a). In 2018, Griffith's First Peoples students' success rate was 75.13%. While the national First Peoples students' success rate was 70.94%, the national non-Indigenous success rate was higher, at 84.59%.

Improving student engagement with GUMURRII, then, could assist in working towards these priorities and closing the educational gap.

1.3 Aim

The main purpose of this research was to investigate what factors influence First Peoples students' decisions to access and engage with GUMURRII throughout their studies. This study addresses a gap within the literature, seeking to better understand how support services are being utilised by students. Firstly, the research aimed to identify why students choose to access and engage with GUMURRII and how support services are being utilised by students. The research also sought to identify what it is about GUMURRII that keeps these students coming back. Lastly, it is hoped that findings can improve student retention, progression and success, increase engagement, and inform service delivery across the university.

1.4 Research Questions

The primary research question is, what are the factors which influence First Peoples students' decisions to access and engage with GUMURRII?

This will be investigated by exploring the following sub-questions:

- Why do First Peoples students access GUMURRII initially?
- How are First Peoples students using GUMURRII facilities, resources and support services?
- What keeps First Peoples students engaging with GUMURRII throughout their studies?

1.5 Significance

Understanding why students initially access and engage with the IEU, and continue to do so, not only will provide explicit information to GUMURRII staff that could be used to

improve First Peoples students' success and work toward parity, but more broadly will inform university-wide support and the work of IEU staff across Australia. Improving student engagement and retention aligns with recommendations from the Behrendt Report (Behrendt et al., 2012) and Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy (2017). Additionally, this study has the capacity to reveal currently unsupported or undersupported approaches that could make a substantial improvement to student retention and completion. As university-wide funding decreases and becomes more competitive (Norton et al., 2018), strategic adjustment to resource allocation would be of great interest and benefit to all Australian universities.

Having worked at GUMURRII for almost 7 years, improving First Peoples students' retention, progression and success is a priority for me. From my own experience and service delivery, I have observed low numbers of First Peoples students at Griffith University regularly accessing and engaging with GUMURRII, and this is similar at other institutions with approximately 20-30% of students using IEU services (Beetson et al., 2007; Trudgett, 2010). Further, based on my own professional experience, it is evident that students who do engage with GUMURRII early in their degree are more likely to stay at university, improve their grades, and have a positive and successful student experience (Griffith University, 2019b). Students who engage later on in their degree often express regret that they did not come in to see us sooner. Numerous studies investigating student support have highlighted the IEU as an important factor in student success (Asmar et al., 2011; Behrendt et al., 2012; Nakata et al., 2017; Oliver et al., 2016). GUMURRII is a great resource for First Peoples students; however, many do not engage and may struggle with their studies on their own. Student success could be improved if greater numbers of students accessed the IEU; therefore, understanding why students engage with GUMURRII could be crucial in encouraging the remaining student cohort to access support.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review will firstly provide an overview of First Peoples' access to, and participation and success in, tertiary education by establishing the importance of higher education in general and the changing higher education landscape, then moving specifically to the status of First Peoples' participation in higher education in Australia. Barriers and factors affecting engagement will be explored with a focus on the underengagement with IEUs. This review will highlight phenomena which have received little attention in the literature in terms of explaining First Peoples' underengagement with vital support services, revealing the need for deeper investigation into the research problem. Finally, the theoretical and conceptual framework will be discussed.

2.1 The Importance of Higher Education

Universities are at the centre of research and innovation within Australia. As Bradley et al. (2008) have comprehensively argued, a country's economic and social progress is influenced by its higher education system. Universities Australia (2018) argued that higher education can contribute to a fairer society by providing a highly educated, skilled workforce. Bradley et al. made a compelling case that the proportion of the population who have attained higher education qualifications must increase to meet rapidly changing global economic demands. Bandias et al. (2014) further demonstrated that higher education can address the socioeconomic disadvantage experienced by First Peoples and make a positive social and economic impact upon communities. To maintain competitiveness and prosperity, higher numbers of suitably qualified and skilled First Peoples are needed to achieve this community impact (Bandias et al., 2014). As local and global needs change, universities must adapt to remain competitive and must plan for the future, which includes planning for greater numbers of First Peoples students. However, despite the evidence that higher education has a positive

effect on First Peoples communities, not all communities are served by universities, resulting in an unmet community need (Andersen et al., 2008; Universities Australia, 2018).

2.2 Changing University Environment

The higher education sector is continually evolving to meet community and global demands. In 2015 the Australian Government examined previous reviews of the higher education system (Department of Education and Training, 2015) and highlighted previous key recommendations together with the responses. Notably, each report (from 1988 to present day) identified the underrepresentation of First Peoples. Additionally, West (1998) recognised that over the next two decades the higher education sector would encounter several changes and pressures in response to increased demand, rising community expectations and technological innovation. This has indeed been the case and, as recommended by James et al. (2017), many traditional features of Australia's higher education system need to be rethought.

Goedegebuure et al. (2017) argued that universities have no option but to reassess the ways they have traditionally done business to keep up with these changes. It is commonly recognised that the higher education sector is changing and that there has been a shift beyond universal systems with universities around the world changing to a mass rather than an elite system (Norton et al., 2018). Harvey et al. (2016) further discussed the changes that have occurred as a result of the introduction of a demand-driven system, specifically, the increased number of underrepresented students. Harvey et al. further reported that as participation has increased proportionally, the disparity still remains. Targets that were set for many equity groups in previous policies and government recommendations (Department of Education and Training, 2015), including First Peoples, have still not been met. A review of policy and practices is needed to see how they can better address educational achievements and outcomes in the ever-evolving educational landscape.

Policies should be developed in response to student diversity and the changes in learning and teaching that have occurred due to technological advancement (James et al., 2017). The modern student cohort is far more diverse than the traditional student body, with increased female and mature-aged student enrolments. Henderson et al. (2017) found that incoming school leavers often have had technology supporting their learning throughout their whole school life. These students are more digitally adept than others and the internet is a way of life rather than a tool for a purpose. While school leavers in an urban environment may be technologically savvy, this may not be the case for those from rural or remote Australia. Those in rural Australia not only have the challenge of isolation, but the lack of infrastructure leads to a digital disadvantage (Park, 2017). Online services, including education, are designed to be more accessible by overcoming the traditional barrier of distance. Given the vastness of Australia, the education system needs to cater for those in regional and urban areas, meaning that differentiated or personalised learning is required to promote an inclusive approach.

Digital technologies (such as lecture recordings, Google Docs, Collaborate, social media) are now commonplace within higher education and have transformed the student experience and course delivery. Their use can enhance learning by providing a personalised learning process and, for those who may not be able to physically attend an institution, increased access to higher education (Henderson et al., 2017; James et al., 2017). Furthermore, the use of social media has transformed communication and relationships between students. Henderson et al. (2017) found that Facebook is the primary way in which students communicate and collaborate with each other, both socially and for study. Social media have also risen as a means for communication within First Peoples communities (Carlson, 2013). These platforms are increasingly used as a means for social and cultural interaction. As Carlson (2017) stated, First Peoples use social media at a higher rate than non-

Indigenous peoples, so the way students use social media for study could impact their engagement with other students and, their tertiary institution.

Griffith University now includes the “digital campus” as its sixth campus due to the increasing number of students opting to study online; the digital campus is now Griffith’s second-largest campus (Griffith University, 2020a). Course material is also being developed increasingly for delivery in a “mixed mode” capacity with some components online instead of traditional face-to-face classes. Some degrees have the option to be completed entirely online or with minimal intensive face-to-face blocks. Instead of speaking in person with students and staff, the rise of technology means students are engaging more with online environments and the cloud campus. This new online environment poses new challenges in terms of student engagement and success. Wise et al. (2011) discovered that while some students find use of technology a distraction, others may benefit from the social aspect of engaging with other students online. However, engagement within an online environment may not necessarily correlate with increased engagement required for learning. Universities, further, often overestimate students’ abilities to use digital technologies for their studies and Prayaga et al. (2017) found for First Peoples students that lack of technical experience increases student attrition rates, especially in online courses. First Peoples entering university may have even less experience with digital technologies due to lack of infrastructure, limited prior education opportunities and cost. As First Peoples are already underrepresented within higher education, these challenges may be even greater.

2.3 First Peoples’ Experiences of Higher Education in Australia

The Australian Government has a responsibility to ensure that higher education providers meet the needs of the community and remain fit for purpose. In 2008, the Australian Government requested a review of the higher education system (Bradley et al., 2008), hereafter referred to as the Bradley Review. The Bradley Review recommended

targets to increase the proportion of First Peoples with university qualifications. This includes increasing initial participation rates. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) defined education participation rates thus: “for any group within the population, it is the number of people attending an educational institution (either full or part time) expressed as a percentage of the population in that group” (Educational Glossary section, para. 12). The Bradley Review provided 46 recommendations, of which two are specifically relevant to this study. Recommendation 4 refers to the setting of participation rate targets for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and Recommendation 30, is made to the Australian Government to review ways to improve higher education access and outcomes for First Peoples.

In response to the Bradley Review, the Australian Government commissioned a further review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People by Behrendt et al. (2012), hereafter referred to as the Behrendt Report. This has been an extremely influential publication, cited more than 250 times in research pertaining to First Peoples in higher education since its publication (see, for example, Nakata et al., 2018; Wilks & Wilson, 2015). The Behrendt Report compared and critiqued First Peoples’ participation rates, programs and funding in every institution around Australia. As participation rates have always been lower than for non-Indigenous students, the Behrendt Report recommendations strive for parity.

The tertiary education sector should be concerned that the Behrendt Report found that only 1.4% of university students were First Peoples, despite their making up almost 3% of the Australian population. The sector should be even more concerned that since the report was published in 2012, that participation rate has decreased to only 1.3% in 2017 (Department of Education and Training, 2018). Throughout many of the report’s 35 recommendations, support was identified as a key theme in student success. Recommendation 6 encourages universities and vocational education providers to support their First Peoples staff in

obtaining tertiary education. Recommendation 10 suggested a university-wide approach from faculties, mainstream services and, IEUs to support First Peoples students' success. Of specific interest is Recommendation 11, which identifies the important role of IEUs in student support and success. It further suggests that universities review their IEU's objectives and current resourcing to ensure they have the capacity to deliver quality student support services and improve completion outcomes.

Making First Peoples' participation and retention in higher education a national government and university priority is essential for improving student engagement, retention and success (Behrendt et al., 2012; Griffith University, 2019a; Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2006; Universities Australia, 2017). Higher education can transform the capacity of First Peoples and non-Indigenous communities to jointly solve problems which lead to socioeconomic disadvantage, therefore achieving better social and economic outcomes (Bandias et al., 2014; Fredericks et al., 2015).

2.4 Settler Colonialism and Participation in Education

Past research has established that low participation rates stem from current and historical injustices towards First Peoples (Bin-Sallik, 2003; Herbert, 2010; K. Martin, 2003; Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011). Prior to European colonisation in 1788, First Peoples inhabited Australia for over 60,000 years with a strong connection to land and culture. Europeans arrived, taking First Peoples' land for themselves and attempted to wipe out the population (Pascoe, 2012). This taking of land is part of what is referred to as settler colonialism, which has had an impact on education systems throughout the world (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Tuck and Yang (2012) explain:

Within settler colonialism, the most important concern is land/water/air/subterranean earth (land, for shorthand, in this article.) Land is what is most valuable, contested, required. This is both because the settlers make Indigenous land their new home and

source of capital, and also because the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence. This violence is not temporally contained in the arrival of the settler but is reasserted each day of occupation. (p. 5)

Hence, invasions that happened *in the past* continue to impact upon First Peoples' participation in settler societies in the present day.

Government policies were developed attempting to relocate, "protect," adapt and assimilate First Peoples into Western society destroying First Peoples culture and knowledges (Dudgeon et al., 2010). After colonisation, authorities were not in agreement regarding whether First Peoples could receive an education. This resulted in First Peoples receiving little formal schooling (Bin-Sallik, 2003). The exclusion from schooling clearly perpetuated educational disadvantage. Tripcony (2000) suggested that the 1989 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education policy was developed in response to First Peoples being the most educationally disadvantaged group in Australia.

The journey to university for First Peoples has been difficult. Despite having the oldest culture and knowledge system in the world, it took over 100 years of higher education within Australia for any First Peoples to be accepted and to enrol to study (Trudgett, 2010; University of Sydney, n.d.). It was relatively recently, in 1966, that an Aboriginal man, Charles Perkins, achieved the first undergraduate degree (Trudgett, 2010). Both Bin-Sallik (2003) and Herbert (2010) pinpointed that the 1967 Referendum was significant in paving the way for special education schemes for First Peoples to rectify historical rejection and exclusion. Tripcony (2000) explained further how the referendum allowed Aboriginal affairs, including education at the time, to be managed by the federal government. The federal self-determination policy was implemented in 1972. Herbert added, however, that by 1967, First Peoples were already subjected to significant oppression and educational disadvantage. Since then numerous policies, commissions and supports have been established to address

disadvantage and improve participation rates. While rates have increased over time, there is still much more needed to achieve parity and to meet key national social justice goals (Barney, 2016; Bin-Sallik, 2003; Herbert, 2010; Oliver et al., 2016; Page et al., 2017).

As Bradley et al. (2008) demonstrated that higher education provides economic and social opportunities and positively impacts communities, then reasons why First Peoples are either dissuaded from participating in higher education or are at risk of being overlooked by the education system need further investigation (Bandias et al., 2014; Oliver et al., 2016). Examining the differences between the non-Indigenous and First Peoples students' profiles is an important starting point. First Peoples students are more likely to be first in family, older, female, to have relocated, or to be studying online in courses relating to their current employment (Asmar et al., 2011). It is also widely reported that the differences and disparity are due to academic learning challenges, institutional barriers, finances, cultural isolation, and other family and personal circumstances, all inhibiting tertiary success (Barney, 2016; Behrendt et al., 2012; Bin-Sallik, 2003; Fredericks et al., 2015; Nakata et al., 2004; Page et al., 2017). Universities can facilitate successful outcomes by addressing First Peoples' education as core university business and providing targeted support (Andersen et al., 2008; Bin-Sallik, 2003; Fredericks et al., 2015; Nakata et al., 2018; Oliver et al., 2016). In particular, universities need to understand the barriers to First Peoples' access and participation and how these understandings should shape their engagement with students.

2.5 Enablers, Barriers, and Student Engagement

Lower participation, retention and success rates of First Peoples students result from barriers to tertiary success. Preparedness, finances, racism, health, family and community responsibilities, cultural isolation, language and literacy, lack of support, and family networks are commonly identified (Barney, 2016; Behrendt et al., 2012; Bin-Sallik, 2003; Fredericks et al., 2015; Nakata et al., 2004; Page et al., 2017). Furthermore, First Peoples struggle to assert

their cultural identity in a Western institution, as their viewpoints and cultural practices are routinely contested (Nakata, 2007a). Cultural and family obligations are not recognised as being as important as university obligations, meaning that students are presented with impossible demands to satisfy – sometimes, resulting in opposition from their own families (Barney, 2016; Nakata et al., 2004; Oliver et al., 2016). This can result in students feeling isolated and feeling that they do not belong.

Institutional and individual racism has long been experienced by First Peoples in higher education and Bin-Sallik (2003) argued that while universities have a responsibility to address racism, no real action had taken place. The Behrendt Report identified that racism continues to be a barrier for students accessing and succeeding at university. At university, students experienced racism in their classes and from staff and Rochecouste et al. (2017) recommended that universities take a greater responsibility to ensure all staff were appropriately trained to deal with racial discrimination. Furthermore, institutional barriers such as the requirement to provide a Confirmation of Heritage can deter or prevent students from receive support. Carlson (2013) explained that in order to obtain a Confirmation of Heritage, three requirements must be met and further argued that these do not always reflect the diverse experiences of First Peoples under colonial conditions, specifically the requirement to be accepted by the community in which the applicant lives. As such obtaining this document can be challenging.

Students from remote communities may also feel isolated and underprepared for tertiary education. Nakata et al. (2017) identified that many First Peoples students are underprepared for university as result of the gap “between community or school experience/outcomes and the entry demands of universities” (p. 3), so the number of students who meet entry requirements are low. Quality of schooling in rural and remote communities may fail to prepare students for university; high-quality teachers are also less likely to choose

to work in disadvantaged rural and remote schools (Burnett & Lampert, 2016) and there is often a high turnover of teachers which results in a disrupted experience (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009; Herbert et al., 2014). Subject choices in school may be limited, therefore limiting opportunity to complete requisite subjects (Herbert et al., 2014). Furthermore, First Peoples in rural and remote communities are less likely than those in non-remote areas to have completed Year 12 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Oliver et al. (2016) also suggested that English may be a second or third language, meaning these students are further unprepared: “learning in a language or dialect other than one’s home language severely disadvantages young learners” (p. 24). Universities assume that students with this background are proficient in English when this may not be the case (N. Carter et al., 2019; Oliver et al., 2016).

The absence or disregard toward First Peoples’ worldviews in Western concepts, and university curricula, can also cause conflict within students (Fredericks, 2009a; Sammel et al., 2020; Uink et al., 2019). As discussed in Section 2.4, settler colonialism has shaped education throughout the world (Tuck & Yang, 2012) and First Peoples’ ways of learning are overlooked. In Duncan’s (2020) experience, if students were not educated “the White way” they were considered uneducated. Within Western disciplines, educational disadvantage can be further perpetuated when First Peoples knowledges are absent (Nakata et al., 2004). The lack of cultural safety within universities can result in students becoming isolated and dropping out (Barney, 2016; Bin-Sallik, 2003; Fredericks, 2009a). Further to this, students are often undertaking study in a new discipline, consisting of its own jargon and discourse, which does not consider their cultural knowledge or expertise (Nakata et al., 2004; Sammel et al., 2020). Duncan (2020) also suggested that there has been a lack of respect towards First Peoples knowledges and perspectives in teaching and learning. Herbert (2010) also identified the importance of curriculum that contains First Peoples knowledges as key in engaging

students with their studies: “Operating within an Indigenous knowledges dimension enables students to critique the learning content and experience throughout their courses, to identify and address their own issues, and use such knowledge and understanding as the platform for their personal positive growth” (p. 24).

To break down the above barriers, it has been suggested that student support needs to be engaging and university wide. Asmar et al. (2015) argued that the support *perceived* by students to be provided is also a key factor in student success. Students are more likely to persist and be successful with their study when they engage in educationally effective practices such as orientation, classes and tutoring (Asmar et al., 2011; Kuh et al., 2008). In 2009, the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) was conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (Asmar et al., 2011; Coates, 2010). Prior to this there had not been extensive research into Australian university student engagement (Coates, 2010). Asmar et al.’s (2011) analysis of AUSSE focused on First Peoples student engagement, reporting that one third of First Peoples students at Australian universities cited their IEU as the best way their university engaged them in learning. Despite this, there is not a lot of research into engagement or how students are interacting with IEUs (Asmar et al., 2011). The following section examines the history and role of IEUs in order to contextualise the site where much university engagement with First Peoples students occurs.

2.6 Indigenous Education Units

There is consensus that if appropriate support is provided, First Peoples students can be equally as successful as their non-Indigenous peers (Andersen et al., 2008). The Behrendt Review (2012) reiterated that universities are responsible for providing this support. University support has been provided by IEUs through programs and initiatives that increase access, participation and success of First Peoples’ students (Andersen et al., 2008; Nakata et al., 2004). The historical development of IEUs from 1970 to 2003 has been detailed by Bin-

Sallik (2003) and also explored by Nakata et al. (2004) and Trudgett (2010). IEUs stem from a proposal by William Wentworth in 1959 to create a National Institute of Aboriginal Studies. The Aboriginal Task Force (ATF) at the South Australian Institute of Technology was established in 1973 to deliver the first specific First Peoples program (Nakata, 2004; Trudgett, 2010). Bin-Sallik (2003) agreed that the ATF model laid the foundation for First Peoples higher education in Australia, saying “the ATF developed a culturally safe supportive environment model that has become the blueprint for Indigenous higher education growth in Australia” (p. 24). The National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) further suggested that targeted policy, entry pathways and support programs were required to increase First Peoples’ participation and success at university (NAEC, 1986). Under the direction of the NAEC, the ATF model was initially replicated in teachers’ colleges and training institutes. In the 1990s and following the Dawkins (1987) discussion paper, teachers’ colleges and training institutions merged with universities, bringing their model with them. The model was replicated in universities as support units Australia wide (Bin Sallik, 2003). The model proposed that support units: employ staff to assist students to manage coursework and develop necessary skills to assist with completion through counselling support, tuition, and personal and academic support; encourage the maintenance of First Peoples identity; provide a space to do this; and offer an alternate entry pathway due to the failure of the secondary schooling system in this respect.

IEUs are now found within most universities in Australia, providing support to First Peoples students. Support provided by most IEUs encompasses the model first proposed by the ATF as well as additional orientation and tertiary preparation programs, individual tutoring, and kitchen and computing facilities. The Behrendt Report detailed this generally; however, as Oliver et al. (2016) explained, there is high variability among institutions regarding the level of support delivered. Naming is also inconsistent, with IEUs referred to as

Student Support Units, Indigenous Education Support Units, and Indigenous Centres. Some universities have IEUs that are centralised, some have networks within faculties, and other universities have no specialised support centre facilities at all (Trudgett, 2010; Page et al., 2017).

Typical ways in which IEUs support students include providing academic assistance through tutoring and enabling programs, pastoral and social support, and provision of resources and study spaces. Fredericks et al. (2015) explained that at Central Queensland University there are alternative access pathways which assist tertiary entry for First Peoples who may not meet standard entry requirements. This pathway incorporates an enabling program, which can assist students who have a different educational background which may have underprepared them for tertiary study. Central Queensland University's program is known as the Tertiary Entry Program and is delivered by their IEU.

Nakata et al. (2017) explored the Nura Gili IEU at the University of New South Wales. They noted that staff were encouraged to be student focussed by treating students as though they were family members. Nura Gili staff also implemented a procedure of contacting every commencing student and asking "how they are travelling" (pastoral care needs), "how they are finding their courses" (academic learning), "how they are settling in to university" (transition), and "is there anything staff could help them with" (support needs). The first time this was trialled, attrition rates for the period decreased to zero and since implementation of this intervention, First Peoples' retention rates have improved (Nakata et al., 2017).

GUMURRII is the IEU at Griffith University in Queensland, and is described as the heart of Griffith's First Peoples community. Each of the university's five physical campuses has dedicated facilities for First Peoples students. Facilities include 24-hour access to computers, complimentary printing, study spaces, and kitchen facilities (Griffith University,

2018). GUMURRII works in collaboration with Griffith's central services such as Equity and Diversity, Student Disability and Accessibility, and Counselling and Wellbeing services (Griffith University, 2020b) as part of a network of support ensuring the success of First Peoples students.

Despite the variation in organisation and support provided by institutions, when asked about their IEU, First Peoples who accessed support overwhelmingly identified it as being important to their study (Asmar et al., 2015; Behrendt et al., 2012; Oliver et al., 2016). Students themselves identified that IEUs are important to their success, and it is obvious that support leads to success; however, not all students access or engage with IEUs at their university. It was further discovered that only 20-30% of students accessed tutorial support facilitated by IEUs (Beetson et al., 2007; Griffith University, 2019b). Trudgett (2010) highlighted the need for IEUs to actively engage with students, and also reported that many postgraduate students (37%) had never visited the IEU at their university.

It is clear, as also indicated by Asmar et al. (2015) and Oliver et al. (2016), that investigating student support mechanisms, including how students are engaging and interacting with IEUs, is important for understanding the nuances of student support that seem to provide the most student gain. IEUs facilitate a space to be a First Peoples scholar, and this is not found elsewhere within the university. IEUs function similarly to a community of practice (CoP), students who have a shared interest in the practice, in this case being a First Peoples scholar, come to understand it better by associating with other people who know and share the practice (Wenger, 2011). Recommendation 11 from the Behrendt Report specifically identified reviewing IEUs as a means to improve retention and completion rates. While there are studies into specific IEU programs such as tutoring (Lydster & Murray, 2019; Nakata et al., 2018; Whatman et al., 2008; Wilks et al., 2017) and First Peoples student experiences of higher education (Barney, 2016; Oliver et al., 2016), there is a gap in

investigating the nature of and reasons behind student engagement (or lack thereof) with IEUs, which this study aims to redress.

2.7 A Place to Belong

First Peoples students' sense of belonging and place can impact upon their success within higher education. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), humans have a fundamental need for positive interpersonal attachments or a need to belong. Belonging is a conceptual framework that has been used since the 1990s to promote student retention, engagement and success at university (Wilson et al., 2018). Everyday activities, experiences and knowledge can establish belonging and attachment. Kahu and Nelson (2018) described belonging as the student's connectedness to the institution, staff, other students, and the discipline being studied. When students feel nurtured, valued and respected at university, they feel part of the university community (Wilson, 2018). Nakata (2007a) theorised student experiences through the Cultural Interface, where First Peoples students live and learn within higher education. Within the Western higher education system, students' traditional collectivist cultural values come into tension with Western individualist values and beliefs. This can result in a disconnection from both their family and community, and from the broader university community (Butler et al., 2019; Nakata, 2007a).

Nakata (2007a) theorised this worldview from a Torres Strait Islander standpoint, and Moreton-Robinson (2013) extended upon this idea to an Aboriginal feminist standpoint from the perspective of women's lived experience. Section 2.9 will explore the concepts of the Cultural Interface and Indigenous Standpoint Theory in greater detail; however, understanding what an Indigenous feminist standpoint entails is important given that First Peoples women account for over 66% of First Peoples university enrolments (Australian Government, 2018). Moreton-Robinson also argued that interconnectedness is the basis of Aboriginal sovereignty: the connection to our respective countries, human ancestors, creative

beings, and all living things informs our standpoint. Within universities, such interconnectedness can only be possible in places where large numbers of First Peoples can live, learn, and work together.

Kahu and Nelson (2018) further theorised the educational interface as a “psychosocial space within which the individual student experiences their education” (p. 63). Within the educational interface, belonging is a component to represent students’ feeling of connection. As discussed previously, there are differences between First Peoples and non-Indigenous students’ patterns of enrolment, and First Peoples are underrepresented within higher education. Already a minority group due to settler colonialism, invasion, massacres, ongoing colonisation, and lower proportional enrolments in contemporary times, First Peoples feel alienated within the broader student population, without a sense of belonging (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

J. Carter et al. (2018) detailed how belonging can be thought of through the concepts of place-attachment and place-identity:

Place-attachment refers to the social interactions and relationships created and developed over time, and the emotional, cognitive and behavioural bonds developed; whereas place-identity refers to the subjective concept of oneself as defined by those social elements and biophysical attributes which are co-constructed through the lived experience of place. (p. 244)

The concept of place can be used to investigate the relationship between people and their environment (J. Carter et al., 2018). J. Carter et al. also described how the ability of First Peoples students to develop a sense of identity, attachment, and belonging is dependent on the sense of comfort instilled by the university and its staff. Butler et al. (2019) identified the importance of connectedness for First Peoples’ wellbeing and described how First Peoples’ sense of community revolves around connections to Country or place, and relationships. The decision to access a place can be influenced by the nature of the place, what happens there,

who is present, how they work, and how the place and spaces look, feel, and are interpreted or experienced (Fredericks, 2009b). Students who feel at home on campus are more likely to stay at university and complete their studies than those who experience feelings of homesickness or are without the comfort and safety of home (J. Carter et al., 2018). First Peoples students can find developing a sense of place attachment more challenging than non-Indigenous students, so IEUs can be of critical importance. As well as offering a physical space, IEUs can provide a sense of place on campus, increasing First Peoples students' sense of belonging and positively contributing to student success (J. Carter et al., 2018; Liddle, 2016).

2.8 Student Engagement in GUMURRII

If First Peoples students are not engaging with support services, and it is identified that support is pivotal in reaching or exceeding parity with non-Indigenous student success, there is clearly a disconnect between the goals of IEUs and the reality of engagement. GUMURRII has aided and supported First Peoples students at Griffith University for over 30 years. During this time there have been significant changes and approaches to service delivery. GUMURRII's Mission Statement (Griffith University, 2018) highlighted a strong support focus:

GUMURRII is dedicated to providing high quality student support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studying at Griffith University. The GUMURRII Student Support Unit strives to provide attainable higher education pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within a safe and culturally appropriate learning environment. (p. 2)

Support was provided by GUMURRII's First Peoples staff that aimed to meet the needs of students through provision of resources, facilitation of alternative entry, tertiary preparation, and tutoring, in a culturally safe environment. To this day, GUMURRII works

with community partners to create pathways for lifelong learning to provide a strong cultural learning community that helps current and future students to follow their aspirations through higher education (Griffith University, 2020b).

GUMURRII actively creates awareness within the community and reaches out to students through community events such as NAIDOC day, school visits, and career expos. There is also a presence at campus events such as open days, on campus experience days, and cultural events. Furthermore, staff reach out to all First Peoples applicants who indicate an interest in studying at Griffith through their Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre application or University Admissions Centre application. Additionally, First Peoples can apply for some programs through the Direct Entry Program which is on the GUMURRII website. GUMURRII staff advise that approximately 30% of First Peoples students regularly utilise the support and facilities that are provided (Griffith University, 2019b). Academic support is primarily facilitated through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tutorial Assistance Program (ATSITAP), formerly the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS). Once students receive tutoring, studies show an improvement in grades, engagement, and success at university (Kinnane et al., 2014; Lydster & Murray, 2019; Nakata et al., 2018). At the time of writing, only 29% of eligible students are accessing ATSITAP at Griffith's Gold Coast campus (Griffith University, 2019b). Staff further report that similar numbers of students regularly study within the centres and take up available opportunities such as scholarships, academic workshops, conference attendance, and networking events.

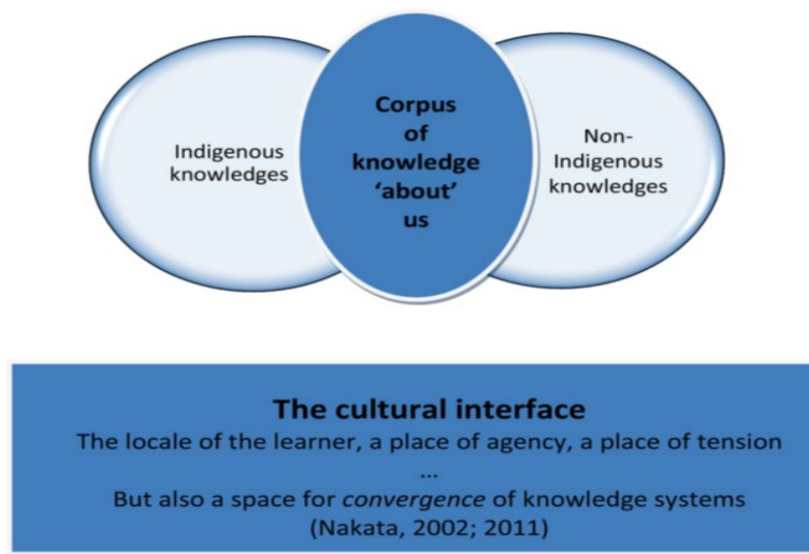
In addition to support, programs and opportunities are facilitated by the IEU. The Kungullanji Summer Research Program (hereafter Kungullanji Program) is a unique program that aims to create a pathway to research for First Peoples students and eligibility is not based upon academic merit. By providing an undergraduate research experience, connecting with the First Peoples research community and providing professional development, the program

is able to raise the aspirations of First Peoples students and fulfils an otherwise unmet student need (Griffith University, 2020c).

Investigating student engagement with IEUs has been suggested (Asmar et al., 2015; Oliver et al., 2016). By understanding why students are engaging with IEUs, support can be targeted to meet student needs. Students who frequently use IEU resources and facilities are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and connection to the university and to their studies (J. Carter et al., 2018; Liddle, 2016). Increasing student engagement can improve student retention and completion rates (Asmar et al., 2011); therefore, the need to investigate student engagement and disconnection is apparent. In order to make future recommendations about increasing student engagement, this research will endeavour to find out which support mechanisms are most highly valued by those students who engage with them rather than seeking reasons for disengagement from students who do not engage with IEUs.

2.9 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study has been framed by Nakata's Cultural Interface and Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Nakata, 2002, 2006, 2007a). As Nakata's theories have been used extensively in research pertaining to First Peoples student engagement and support (see, for example, (Howlett et al., 2008; G. Martin et al., 2017; McLaughlin et al., 2014; Nakata et al., 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017), they are a good fit for this study. The Cultural Interface is illustrated in Figure 2.1 identifying where Indigenous and Western domains meet.

Figure 2.1*The Cultural Interface*

Note. From “Supporting Future Curriculum Leaders in Embedding Indigenous Knowledge on Teaching Practicum Final Report,” by J. McLaughlin, S. Whatman, and C. Nielsen, 2014, p. 17.

CC BY-SA 4.0.

Nakata (2002) defines the Cultural Interface as:

The place where we live and learn, the place that conditions our lives, the place that shapes our futures and more to the point the place where we are active agents in our own lives – where we make decisions – our lifeworld. (p. 285)

The Cultural Interface is a contested space between two knowledge systems, First Peoples knowledges and Western knowledges (Nakata, 2007b). Although First Peoples knowledges may be negotiated and understood in partnership with non-Indigenous peoples, it is only possessed by First Peoples (Nakata, 2007b). Nakata (2007b) further described how the experience within the Cultural Interface varies for people at different times; it is a place full of both possibilities and limitations, positive and negative, and cannot be viewed as deterministic. First Peoples’ experience is not only shaped by tensions within the Cultural Interface: these tensions influence how First Peoples’ experience is explained.

Lived experiences of First Peoples students within the Cultural Interface can be interpreted through Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Standpoint theory looks at the place from which we view the world. Influenced by feminist standpoint theory, Indigenous Standpoint Theory is created from experience; it is flexible and allows for First Peoples' knowledge to be theorised and shared from a First Peoples' perspective (Nakata, 2006). Nakata (2007a) further describes Indigenous Standpoint as a theory,

... that as its first principle can generate accounts of communities of Indigenous people in contested knowledge spaces, that as its second principle affords agency to people, and that as its third principle acknowledges the everyday tensions, complexities and ambiguities as the very conditions that produce the possibilities in the spaces between Indigenous and non-Indigenous positions. (p. 217)

The application of Indigenous Standpoint Theory can shed light on students' perspectives and accounts that may not be obvious to non-Indigenous peoples or understood within Western knowledges. Indigenous Standpoint Theory looks at First Peoples' lived experience within the Cultural Interface. It can assist in understanding students' varied experiences of the colonial world, in particular, the higher education space. This is important as programs and structures implemented by the university are most successful when they are tailored to student needs and led by First Peoples (Andersen et al., 2008). This theory supports First Peoples' voices and supports the methodological choices of gathering first-person accounts and narratives through interviews.

Researchers have previously found that First Peoples students can struggle with their cultural identity and their studies within a Western education system (Barney, 2016; Fredericks et al., 2015; Sammel et al., 2020) and that, given the opportunity and a culturally safe environment, they are able to be equally successful as non-Indigenous students at university (Andersen et al., 2008; Herbert, 2010). It is also a university's responsibility to ensure that a culturally safe environment is provided (Bin-Sallik, 2003; Griffith University,

2016). Griffith University (2016) states: “Griffith University and GUMURRII SSU are dedicated to providing high quality student support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a culturally appropriate learning environment” (p. 16). The theoretical lens of Cultural Interface and Indigenous Standpoint Theory is expected to assist with interpreting student accounts of their experiences in the IEU, particularly with regard to cultural safety. These frameworks will also allow for students to provide insights into students’ own challenges and successes as they experience and understand them. The incorporation of these theoretical frameworks into the research design privileges First Peoples students’ voices and allows their experience to be voiced from their point of view.

Chapter 3: Research Design

This section provides an overview of the design adopted by this research to achieve the aims and objectives as previously stated in Sections 1.4 and 1.5. The methodology and how these methods will be implemented is discussed in Section 3.1; ethics are considered in Section 3.2; the site and sample selection are explored in Section 3.3; the participants are presented in Section 3.4; the survey instrument to be used in this study is detailed together with an overview of the proposed interview questions in Section 3.5; Section 3.6 discusses the procedure and timeline for the study; and Section 3.7 details the data analysis process.

3.1 Methodology

In order to answer the research question, a case study approach including analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data was undertaken. R. Yin (2003) suggested that case studies are the preferred strategy when seeking to answer *how* or *why* questions, explaining, however, that case study is also justified to explore certain *what* questions. Additionally, there may be many variables contributing to students' engagement with GUMURRII and adopting a case study approach allowed for deep understanding of these phenomena (Cohen et al., 2018; R. Yin, 2003). Furthermore, as this research explored a unique case and is of particular interest to the researcher, an intrinsic case study was fitting (Stake, 1995). Previous research has suggested that using quantitative methods in addition to qualitative methods could yield a greater response rate from First Peoples students at Griffith University (Hutchings et al., 2018).

A broad overview of access and engagement was collected from as many students as possible by distributing an online survey. More in-depth responses were collected through interviews/focus groups. Combining collection of quantitative and qualitative responses rather than using a single method allows for a broader understanding of important educational occurrences (Gay et al., 2006). Trudgett et al. (2016) utilised a mixed methods approach in their study of First Peoples doctoral students and Lowe et al. (2019) further employed this approach in

their Aboriginal Voices project. Within this study, collecting survey and interview data provided an overview of access and engagement from many students and allowed an in-depth study with a smaller group of students (Creswell, 2012; Punch, 2009). It is important to allow First Peoples students the opportunity to provide extended responses and clearly express their perspective regarding engagement with GUMURRII.

My position as an insider-researcher has been considered. As shared in Section 1.2, I have a strong connection to South East Queensland and the lands upon which Griffith University is situated. Griffith University's five campuses are located upon the lands of the Kombumerri, Yugembeh, Yuggera, Turrbal, Yugarabul, and Jagera Peoples which neighbour Quandamooka Country. I have a deep personal interest in First Peoples' success within higher education, particularly at Griffith. I completed my undergraduate degree at Griffith, and my niece commenced her undergraduate degree at Griffith in 2020. Furthermore, I have been employed at GUMURRII in a student-centric service role for since 2014. It was expected that this familiarity would allow me to be accepted by the participants, facilitating detailed responses (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Insider positioning can be advantageous when recruiting participants as there is already a relationship with the gatekeeper (Paechter, 2013) and this was indeed the case with this study. Additionally, it was important to consider any influence my positioning may have had on data collection and analysis and on ensuring data were collected without presumption (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Any influence this possible limitation may have had on the qualitative data was mitigated by anonymous survey responses (Gay et al., 2006).

In the survey stage of the research design, an online survey was developed and distributed to all currently and recently enrolled ($n = 876$) First Peoples students (see Appendix A for full survey). The aim at this stage was to gain a broad overview of IEU access and engagement from as many students as possible. Creswell (2012) stated that quantitative methods provide "useful information if you need to describe trends about a large number of people" (p. 535). Through

using a survey, data from students who did not frequent the IEU or engage with support services could be also collected and included in the study, informing and how students were using the IEU and with what frequency. The survey contained closed and open response questions. Closed question responses underwent descriptive statistical analysis to determine the frequency of responses. Open response questions elicited short narrative answers from the students. Themes were manually coded using thesaurus and search functions within Microsoft Word and quotes were sorted into tables and used to further inform data collection in the qualitative phase. The data analysis process is detailed in Section 3.7.

In the interview stage, students were invited to participate in a phenomenological study using semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B for interview questions). Students registered their interest to participate in this stage of the research through a link in the online survey. In order to manage any bias from my insider position, interviews were conducted by a member of my supervision team. The inclusion of qualitative methodology in this research aligns with First Peoples' epistemology (K. Martin, 2003). The conversational nature of this phase allowed participants to have their voices heard and truly be involved in the research process. Phenomenology was selected to create meaning from the students' lived experience (Van Manen, 1997). With roots in philosophy, phenomenology aims to describe experiences of individuals in their everyday world. The focus is on the human experience of a phenomenon from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). This approach was included to allow the participants' perceived experiences to be portrayed, encapsulating the student perspective, as "the element that distinguishes phenomenology from other qualitative approaches is that the subjective experience is at the centre of the inquiry" (Ary et al., 2018). Phenomenology has been used as a methodology in educational research (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; MacIver, 2012), and specifically within First Peoples educational research in Australia (Fitch et al., 2017; Mander et al., 2015). The benefit of

utilising semi-structured interviews in this instance was the flexibility to tailor questioning to the individual and gain insight from open responses (Cohen et al., 2018). This methodological design allowed the research question to be investigated from the students' perspective and facilitated coherent analysis via the theoretical lens of the Cultural Interface and Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Nakata, 2007a).

To further honour First Peoples research process and philosophy (K. Martin, 2003; Rigney, 2006), I have chosen to name and describe the IEU in this investigation. Even though this is contrary to Western methodology and case study protocols, and my own University's ethics recommendations, I successfully argued at ethics stage with Council of Elders support for identification of the site. As a Nunukul Aboriginal woman working at GUMURRII, I believe that this decision further honours First Peoples' knowledges and intellectual property, which the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC, 2018) acknowledged can be done by naming whose knowledge is informing the project. To enable me to honour my community commitments and conduct this research with spirit and integrity, I must acknowledge GUMURRII and my place as an insider researcher. To withhold this information would be the Western way of de-identifying and allowing the academy to appropriate our knowledges. As K. Martin (2003) explained, "Our Ways of Doing express our individual and group identities, and our individual and group roles" (p. 210).

3.2 Ethical Considerations

In addition to approval from the Griffith University Office for Research Human Research Ethics Committee (GU Ref No: 2019/419), which included being permitted to name the site, a thorough consultation was undertaken with key Griffith University stakeholders. This project was discussed with both outgoing and incoming Directors of GUMURRII, Director of Griffith's Indigenous Community Engagement Programs and Partnerships, and members of the Griffith University Council of Elders. Permission was sought from all parties

to survey and interview the current cohort of the university's First Peoples students. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research and their potential role prior to their participation via an information sheet. Written consent and willingness to participate was obtained from students prior to their participation (see Appendix C for survey information and consent, Appendix D for interview information, and Appendix E for interview consent). All data collected were securely stored.

Additional ethical considerations for working with First Peoples were adhered to within this study. The NHMRC (2018) guidelines of reciprocity, respect, equality, responsibility, survival and protection, and spirit and integrity were also respected in this research as explained below.

The research aimed to improve and tailor support services provided to First Peoples students based on their experiences and expectations. Findings will be shared in a way that allows giving back to the community of students who have participated in the research. Through consultation with the GUMURRII Director, research will be presented to GUMURRII staff upon completion of the project and submission of the thesis. This aligns with reciprocity in that the community participating in the research receives its benefits. Respect was incorporated throughout this project and exemplified through the use of interviews to collect data. Interviews allowed for deeper engagement with First Peoples' knowledge and experiences. This project considered equality by appreciating and respecting First Peoples' cultures, perspectives and values. This project has a broader responsibility to First Peoples communities to ensure these considerations were upheld. The research was undertaken by me as an Aboriginal researcher who has a lot of experience working with First Peoples students in an academic advisory role. The researcher identified the importance of First Peoples' cultural identity which aligned with the Survival and Protection guideline. The final guideline

of Spirit and Integrity was woven throughout the research by ensuring respect throughout and intended benefit to the First Peoples community (NHMRC, 2018).

The decision to identify Griffith University's First Peoples as the community being investigated is important, to further uphold the spirit and integrity of the research and, to align with cultural ways (NHMRC, 2018). This consideration is significant to First Peoples research as it allows knowledge to be shared and identified, where appropriate aligning with First Peoples' epistemologies even though this conflicts with traditional case study methodology.

It was also important to consider my insider position as the researcher within this study. To minimise any influence this had on data collection, interviews were conducted individually and in one focus group by a member of the research supervision team who understood the aims and context of the study but was not closely related to GUMURRII or the First Peoples student cohort. Any influence associated with the researcher's employment with GUMURRII was expected to be mitigated by the collection of survey data.

3.3 Site and Sample Selection

GUMURRII at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia was selected as the IEU for this study. Griffith University has six campuses: five physical campuses and its digital campus, which is now considered to be its second-largest campus (Griffith University, 2020a). GUMURRII has facilities across each of Griffith University's six campuses and is the heart of Griffith's First Peoples community (Griffith University, 2018). GUMURRII has provided support to First Peoples students for the last 30 years. Griffith currently has the largest First Peoples cohort in Queensland and has one of the highest numbers of First Peoples enrolments of any university in Australia (Australian Government, 2018). As of Trimester 1, 2020, over 1,000 First Peoples were enrolled at Griffith University (Griffith University, 2020d).

As GUMURRII is my place of employment, access to participants was gained through the gatekeeper (Cohen et al., 2018) who was also my line manager. Participants were recruited for the survey phase through convenience sampling (Cohen et al., 2018). The sample in this stage included undergraduate and postgraduate students in all discipline groups, from all Griffith campuses. Participants were currently or recently enrolled at Griffith and identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Participants were recruited to the second stage, which consisted of individual interviews and focus groups, by registering their interest at the completion of the online survey. These students were then contacted to arrange an interview at a time and location convenient to them. Individual interviews were held on the Gold Coast campus both outside and inside GUMURRII and several were conducted over the phone. One focus group was held at Gold Coast and one at Nathan campus. Participants were recruited for this stage until a point of data saturation was reached (Gay et al., 2006).

3.4 Participants

The survey was distributed to all current and recently graduated Griffith University students who self-identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and responses were collected between October and December in 2019; 147 completed survey responses were obtained, and 10 students participated in interviews or focus groups.

Participants identified their age by selecting an age range: 18-22 (34.7%); 23-29 (18.4%); 30-39 (17.0%); 40-49 (19.0%); and 50+ (10.8%) as shown graphically in Figure 3.1

While the largest individual age range was represented by students most likely to have recently left school or to have come to university directly from school (34.7%), the majority of responses were from mature aged students or those who did not enroll directly from school to university (65.3%).

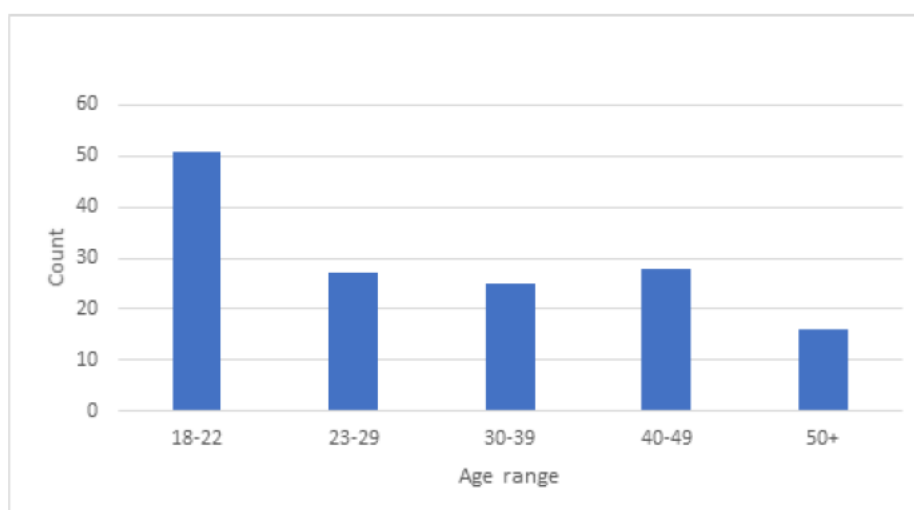
Figure 3.1*Survey Participant Age Range*

Table 3.1 summarises the demographic features of the study group including their age range, gender, and where students study.

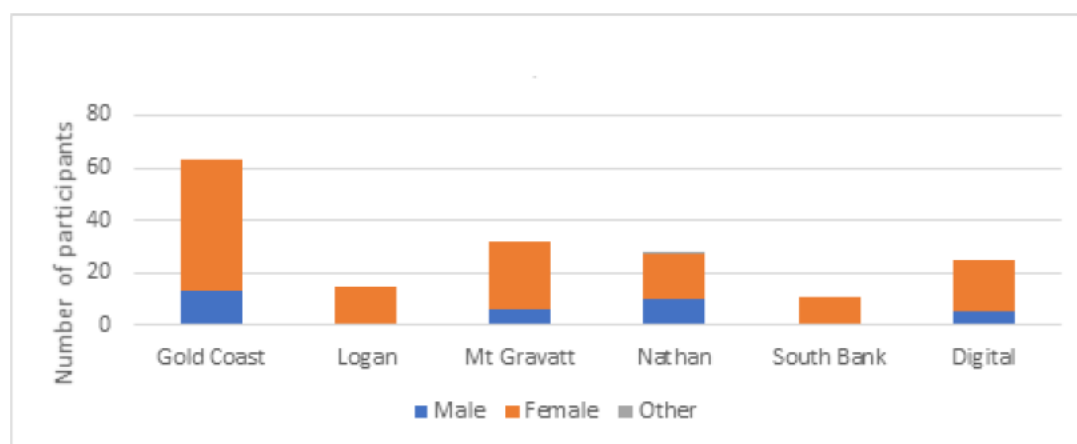
Table 3.1*Demographic Background of Survey Participants*

Campus attended	Age range and gender									
	18-22		23-29		30-39		40-49		50+	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Gold Coast	3	26	6	6	2	7	2	4	0	7
Logan	0	4	0	4	0	3	0	3	1	0
Mt Gravatt	1	9	0	7	0	1	4	5	1	4
Nathan	2	7	3	4	2	3	3	3	0	0
South Bank	1	4	0	0	0	2	0	2	0	2
Digital	0	4	0	8	2	3	4	5	1	0

Nationally, female First Peoples attend university at a higher rate than males (Behrendt et al., 2012), and this is further supported in the survey responses with 78.2% of students identifying as female, 21.1% of respondents identifying as male, and one participant preferred not to identify. Figure 3.2 further shows the greater percentage of females across the different campus locations.

Figure 3.2

Gender Variation by Campus



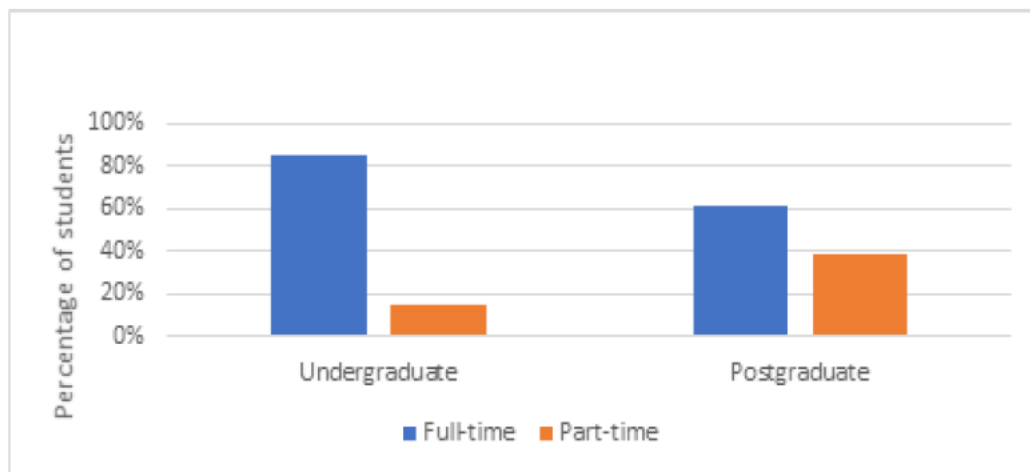
Additionally, the majority of students identified as Aboriginal (85.7%), followed by those who identified as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (10.1%); Torres Strait Islander participants represented 4.1% of respondents. The majority of students were from the South East Queensland region (57.4%) and were first in family to attend university (59.9%). While most students spoke English as their first language, four responses were from students where English was not their first language.

Students may attend more than one campus to complete their studies. Participants were able to identify any or all campuses that they attend. Participants attended the Gold Coast campus (42.6%), Mount Gravatt campus (21.6%), Nathan campus (18.9%), Logan campus (10.1%), South Bank campus (7.4%), and Digital campus (18.2%). Even though most students attended the Gold Coast campus, 47% of students also attended at least one of the other four physical campuses. Students were therefore represented from both the north and

south campuses; 73.5% of students were completing or had recently completed undergraduate degrees and 26.4% of students were undertaking postgraduate studies. Postgraduate students were undertaking both coursework and research programs. Most students were enrolled full-time, completing a minimum of 30 credit points in Trimester 1 and Trimester 2 each year (78.9%), as indicated in Figure 3.3. The sample of students who undertook this study were representative of all year levels and all academic groups, in numbers that reflected the wider population of enrolled First Peoples students.

Figure 3.3

Student Enrolment Status at Undergraduate and Postgraduate Career Levels



3.5 Instruments

Student engagement was first surveyed by Kuh (2001) in the United States through the development of the National Survey of Student Engagement. This laid the foundation for the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) which was created in response to the lack of data on student engagement in effective educational practices within Australia and New Zealand (Coates, 2010). Since its development, the AUSSE has been adapted and used to measure student engagement within the higher education sector globally (Tadesse et al., 2018; H. Yin, 2018). Coates (2010) explained how the AUSSE focuses on six aspects of engagement:

- Academic challenge – how students are challenged to learn by academic expectations and assessments;
- Active learning – students’ efforts to actively construct knowledge;
- Student and staff interactions – the level and nature of students’ contact with teaching staff;
- Enriching educational experiences – participation in broadening educational activities;
- Supportive learning environment – students’ feelings of support and belonging within the university; and
- Work-integrated learning – inclusion of employment-focused experiences.

The AUSSE was used as the starting point to develop an online survey consisting of 34 questions on access and engagement with GUMURRII. Aspects of the survey incorporated some of the relevant aspects from the AUSSE such as student and staff interactions, enriching educational experiences, and the supportive learning environment. The survey asked for background demographics to inform general information on the individuals participating in the study. It also included a mixture of multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions on accessing and utilising GUMURRII and on relationships, such as “What motivated/prompted you to make contact with GUMURRII the first time?” and “How could GUMURRII encourage more students to access services?” (see Appendix A for full survey).

The second stage of the research allowed for a conversational approach to data collection. Indicative questions included “Can you tell me about your experience at university so far?” and “Can you describe a time or example of how GUMURRII has helped you with your studies?” (for all proposed questions, see Appendix B).

3.6 Procedure and Timeline

This study was undertaken part-time across five trimesters, over 2.5 years. In 2018, courses 7017EDN and 7023EDN were undertaken to provide an understanding of research methods and to prepare the research proposal. From 2019 to October 2020, the study utilised three dissertation courses with commencement and methodology finalisation, including survey design, in Dissertation 1, data collection and analysis in Dissertation 2, and written thesis and submission in Dissertation 3. Submission was originally scheduled for July 2020; Dissertation 3 was repeated in Trimester 2, 2020 due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although data collection was completed prior to the pandemic, the completion date was moved out due to this disruption. The timeline was planned to ensure research was completed and presented within the allocated part-time duration. This timeline was further updated once approval to extend the submission date was given (see Appendix F for detailed timeline).

3.7 Data Analysis

To address the primary research question: What are the factors which influence First Peoples students' decisions to access and engage with GUMURRII?, a case study was conducted. The case study investigated the following sub-questions:

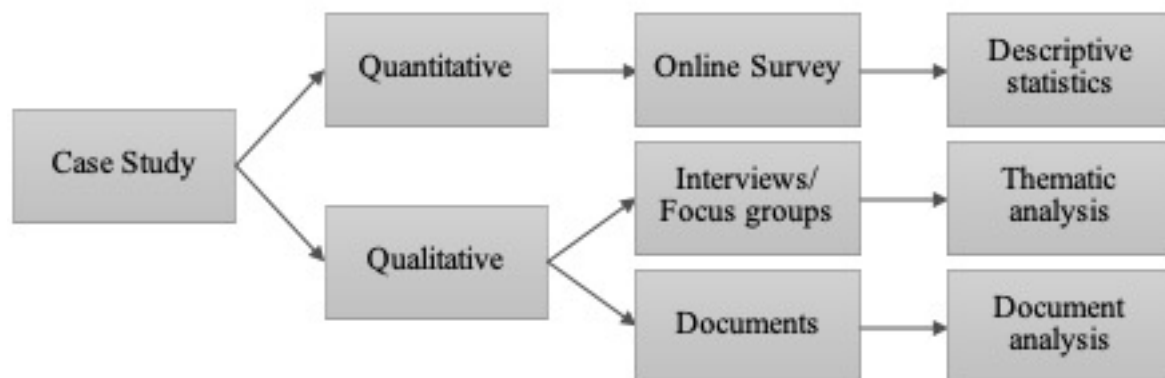
- Why do First Peoples students access GUMURRII initially?
- How are First Peoples students using GUMURRII facilities, resources and support services?
- What keeps First Peoples students engaging with GUMURRII throughout their studies?

The results and findings from this study have identified factors that could be used to improve services to students and increase engagement with GUMURRII and other services across the university. Quantitative survey data were analysed using SPSS (Version 26.0.0.1) to

determine the frequencies or responses, and qualitative open-ended questions and interview transcripts underwent a thematic analysis. A summary of the analysis process is shown in Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4

Overview of Data Collection and Analysis



The research questions were identified through the literature review and background analysis. This informed the methodological approach. The survey and semi-structured interview questions were then developed and both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. It was determined to do a frequency analysis of the responses to the survey to further understand the student cohort, and the use of IEU resources and services, as well as the impact the IEU has on the students' learning experiences. Survey participants were then given the opportunity to express interest to participate further in the research in the form of interviews and/or focus groups.

As discussed earlier, interviews were conducted by another member of the research supervision team – a requirement of the University ethics committee – at either the Gold Coast or Nathan campuses, or over the telephone. Recordings of the interviews were then transcribed verbatim externally through Rev.com. The transcripts and qualitative survey responses were analysed using thematic analysis. As described by Terry et al. (2017), thematic analysis is a process to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning or

“themes” within the data. There are six steps to thematic analysis: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing of themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The first stage of the thematic analysis involved becoming familiar with the data that had been collected through the open-ended survey questions and from the interviews. Interview transcripts were read in conjunction with listening to the audio recordings, and any transcription errors were amended. Errors identified and corrected were primarily names, such as “Kungullanji Program”, “GUMURRII,” and “Cairns,” which may have been unfamiliar to an overseas transcriber.

Written transcripts and survey responses were read and reread and notes were taken to move from the first step of familiarisation with the data to generating initial codes. To achieve the second step, grouping the data into codes, manual coding tables were developed; 55 codes were identified from the survey questions which resulted in the identification of six themes. The interview transcripts were formed into 124 grouping codes and these were then sorted into six themes. Section 4.2 provides a detailed description of the thematic analysis together with the themes that emerged. The following chapter will firstly report on the survey findings and then the findings from the interviews/focus groups.

Chapter 4: Findings

The results of this study are presented in this chapter. Section 4.1 provides the survey responses by firstly reporting the quantitative responses followed by the findings from the open-ended survey questions. The findings from the interviews and focus groups are presented in Section 4.2 according to the themes that were identified from the coding and analysis process. Chapter 4 concludes by identifying and discussing the limitations of this study in Section 4.3.

4.1 Survey Responses

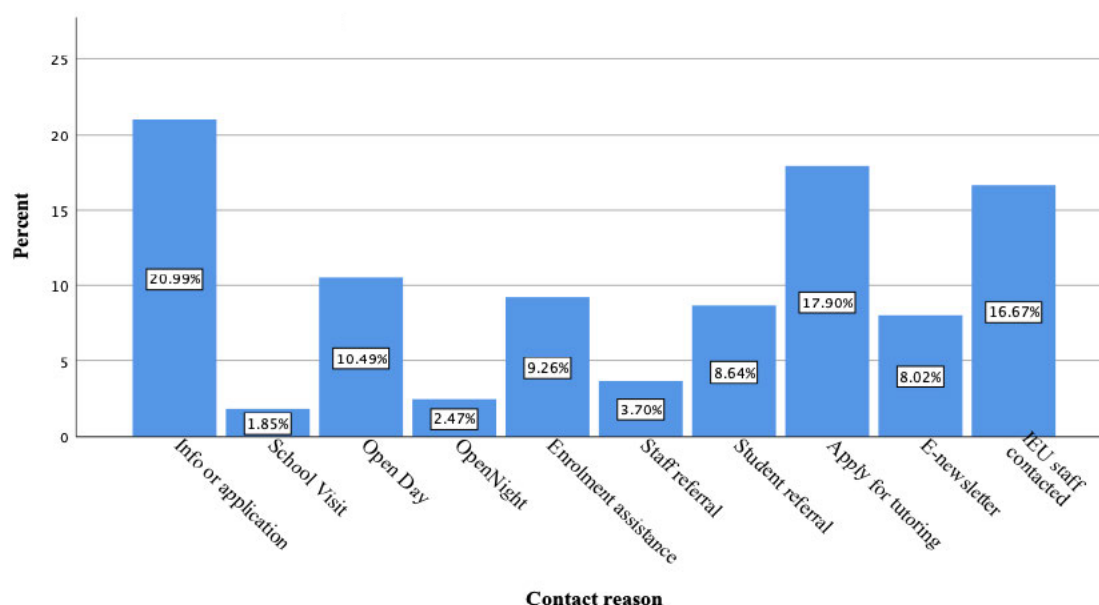
To understand engagement with the IEU, results are presented according to the sections from the survey as follows: Contact; Use of facilities and resources; Relationships; and Open-ended qualitative responses.

4.1.1 Contact

Participants were asked what prompted or motivated them to contact the IEU initially and responses are displayed in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1

First Peoples Students' Reasons for Initial Contact with IEU

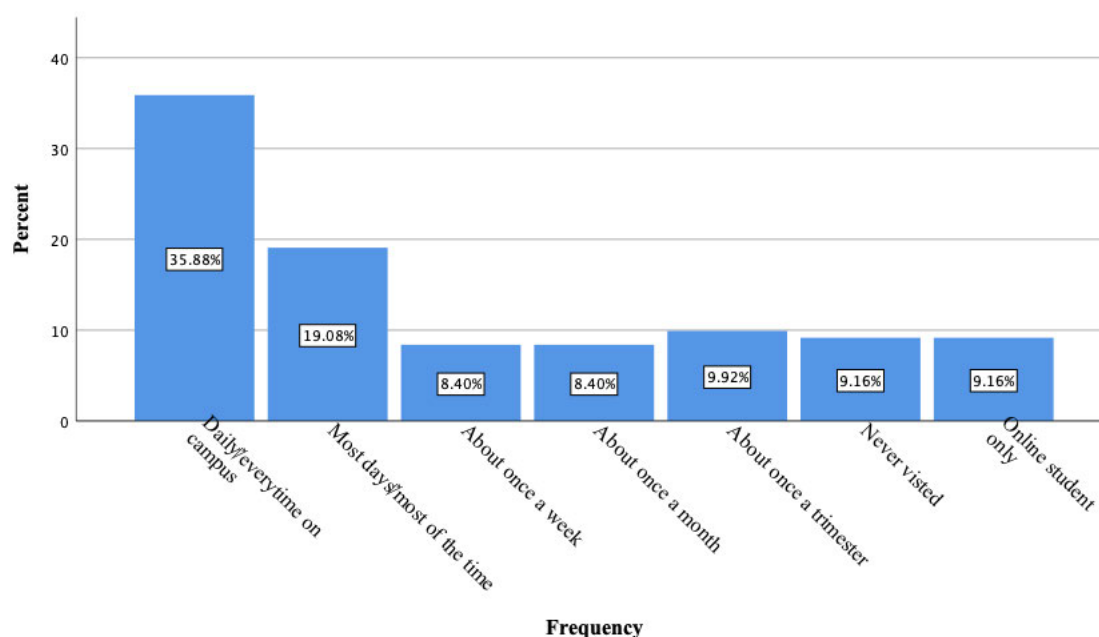


Participants identified that their main reason for first connecting with the IEU was for information on studying at university (20.99%); this was followed by requesting academic assistance through tutoring (17.9%) and as a result of IEU staff contacting them directly (16.67%). The direct contact to students by IEU staff, together with referral from other First Peoples students and university staff, resulted in 29.01% of students connecting with the IEU.

Students were asked how often they visited the IEU on the campus(es) they attend. Responses allow for varied attendance requirements among individual students and programs. Results are indicated in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2

Frequency of Student Visits to the IEU



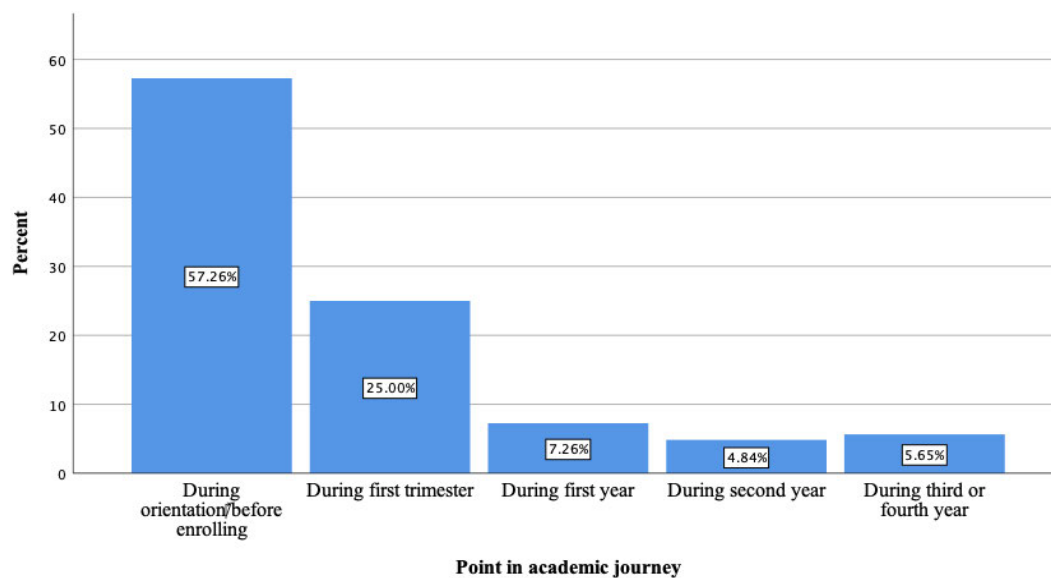
Most students visited the unit regularly, with 54.96% of participants indicating that they visited the unit most of the time or every time they attended campus. Of these, 35.88% of students indicated that they visited the unit daily and 19.08% indicated they visited most days; 8.4% visited one per week, and the same proportion once per month. There were a few students (9.16%) who only visited about once per trimester. There were an additional 9.16%

of on-campus students who had never visited GUMURRII. An option was also included for students who studied online only.

The next question asked how long into their studies they were when they first connected with the IEU. Responses are shown in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3

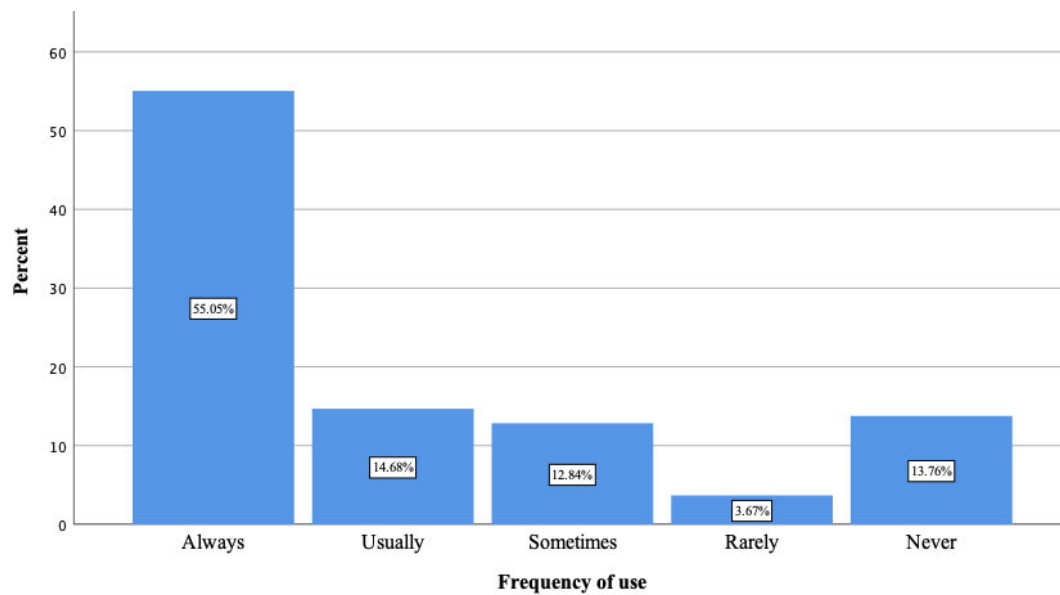
Point in Academic Journey at Which Contact was Made with the IEU



The majority of participants indicated that they had contacted GUMURRII early on in their academic journey; 83.26% of survey participants had made contact before the end of their first trimester of study.

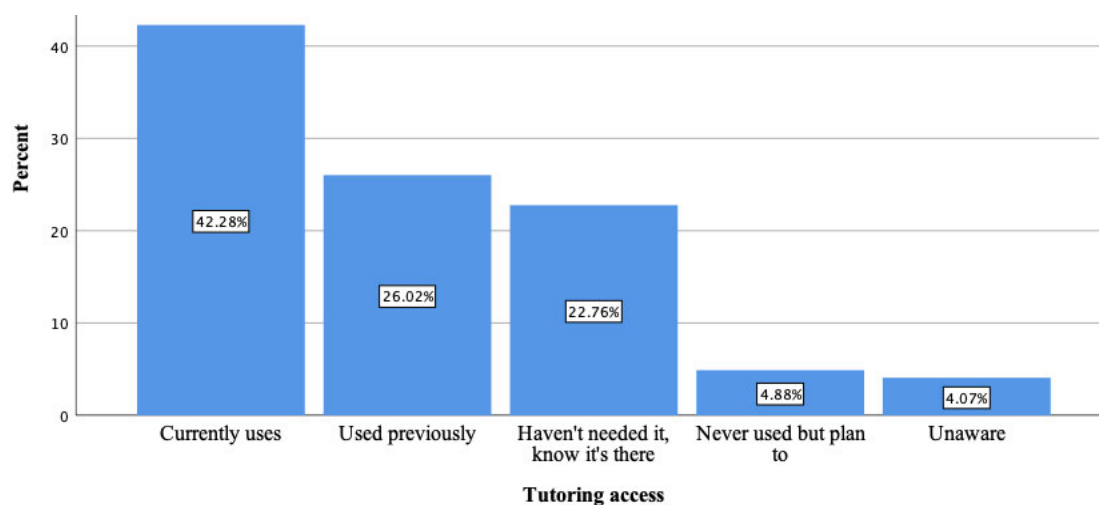
4.1.2 Use of Facilities and Resources

In the next section of the survey, participants were asked to identify how often they used resources and facilities that were provided by the IEU. As the resources and facilities vary between the campus units, crosstabulations were used to determine what was most frequently used on each campus. Across all campuses the most used resource provided was the computers and printing; as indicated in Figure 4.4, 55.05% of participants identified that they always used the computers or printing when they were in the IEU.

Figure 4.4*Frequency of Computer and Printing Use*

Study desks were also always used across the campuses. Three of the five locations have kitchen facilities, and at these locations these facilities were also regularly used by participants. Two campuses also have a meeting room that students can use; however, it was identified that these were not often used by the majority of the survey participants, which could be attributed to the large number of students and the small number of meeting rooms available.

The provision of tutoring is the primary way that the IEU supplements academic learning. Figure 4.5 displays students' use of tutoring.

Figure 4.5*Students' Use of Supplementary ATSITAP Tutoring Program*

As mentioned, on average 30% of enrolled First Peoples students use the tutoring program. Within this sample, 42.28% of participants were currently receiving tutoring through the program; 26.02% of students had previously used the program and another 4.88% were planning to use it in the future. The remaining responses were from students who had not received tutoring at all throughout their studies: 22.8% of students were aware that tutoring was available but had never used it. Concerningly, 4.1% of participants did not know that tutoring was available; the majority of these were online students.

The final resource investigated was the provision of financial assistance to students. Participants were asked whether they had sought financial assistance from the IEU specifically. This was not in relation to general university scholarships or other incentives that were provided to all students, such as bookshop vouchers. The majority of participants had not applied for any financial assistance from the IEU. For those students who had accessed financial assistance, assistance to purchase course materials, for personal reasons, and attending conferences or exchanges were identified. However, the percentage of students requesting each type from the different campuses varied; for example, the main purpose for which students at one campus requested funds was for personal reasons (at Logan, 50% of

bursary requests were due to personal reasons) while at another campus the primary reason was for assistance to attend a conference (at Gold Coast campus, 60% of bursary requests were to attend a conference).

4.1.3 Relationships

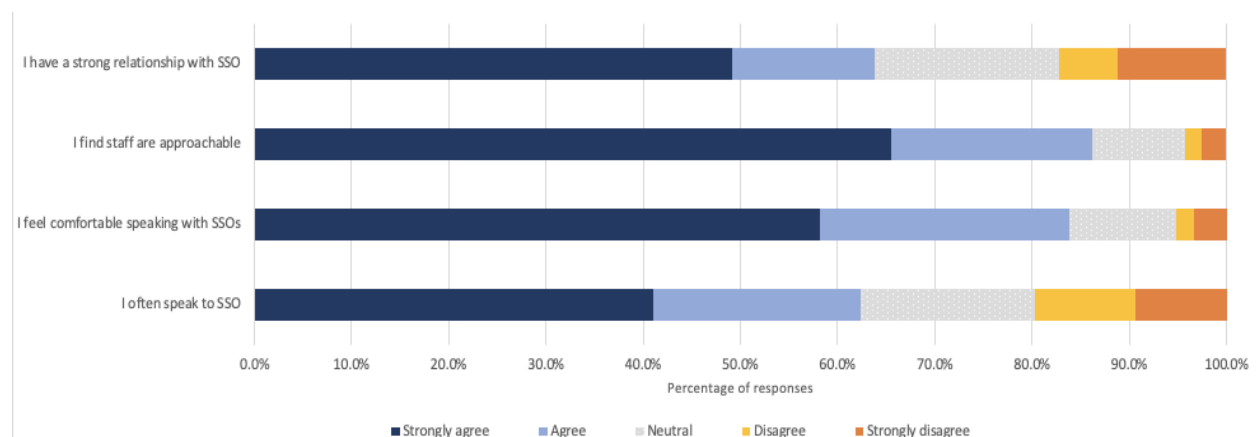
Students were asked about their relationships with front line GUMURRII staff, Student Success Officers (SSOs), and with other First Peoples students. Firstly, participants were asked to rate statements on a 5-point scale of *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The statements were:

- I often speak to SSOs in GUMURRII.
- I feel comfortable speaking with SSOs.
- I find GUMURRII staff approachable.
- I have a strong relationship with one or more SSOs.

As represented in Figure 4.6 over 60% of students strongly agreed or agreed with all of the above statements. Even though over 80% of students felt comfortable speaking with SSOs and found GUMURRII staff approachable, they did not necessarily speak with them often.

Figure 4.6

Students' Opinions of Relationship with GUMURRII Staff



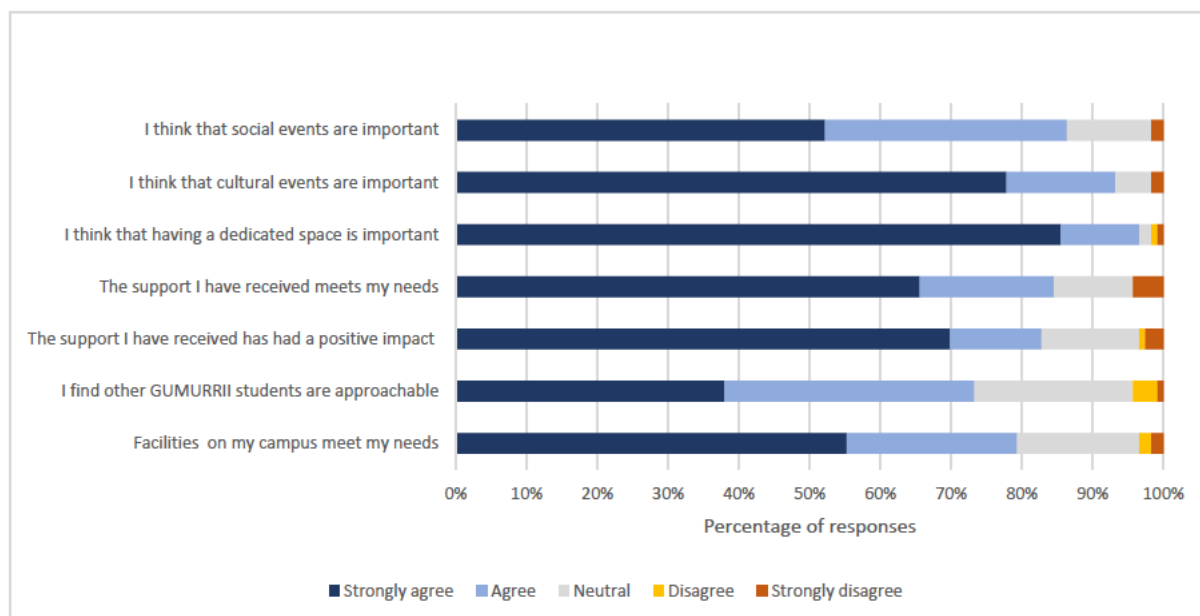
Participants were asked to identify their primary reason for seeking assistance from SSOs and they were further given the opportunity to provide additional details. The survey revealed that 67.30% of participants identified that they spoke to SSOs about their studies; however, simply having a yarn with staff was also important (48.30%), as one participant indicated: “To make me laugh when I feel down. GUMURRII staff are deadly!”.

Further questions in this section related to participants’ relationships with other First Peoples students. Firstly, participants were asked to rate, on a 5-point scale from *always*, *usually*, *sometimes*, *rarely*, to *never*, how likely they were to sit in class, work on assessments, study for exams, or spend time outside university socially with First Peoples students they met through the IEU. Students were more likely to attend class with other First Peoples students than to engage in any other activity. Over 45% of students indicated they had never worked on assessments, studied for exams, or spent time socially outside of university with students they had met in in the IEU.

Participants were asked to identify, on a 5-point scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*, with the following statements:

- I think that GUMURRII social events such as BBQs and trivia nights are important.
- I think that cultural events such as NAIDOC, yarnning circles, Walk and Talk are important.
- I think that having a dedicated study space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is important.
- The support I have received from GUMURRII staff meets my needs.
- Support received from GUMURRII has had a positive impact on my studies.
- I find other students in GUMURRII are approachable.
- GUMURRII facilities on the campus I visit most meet my needs.

Their responses are presented in Figure 4.7.

Figure 4.7*First Peoples Students' Responses to Survey Statements*

As Figure 4.7 indicates, the majority of students (greater than 73%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the above statements. Over 93% of students agreed or strongly agreed that a dedicated space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was important and that the inclusion of cultural events was important.

4.1.4 Open-Ended Survey Questions

Open-ended questions were included to allow for a collection of responses from students who may not participate further in the interview/focus group phase of the research. Questions were aimed to gather students' perspectives on their support received, ideas and suggestions for improvements, and on how the IEU could encourage engagement with a greater number of students.

The first question asked whether IEU support had assisted students in their decision to stay at university, by selecting *Yes* or *No* and providing a response: 75% of participants responded in the affirmative and cited reasons including tutoring, community, and staff advice and assistance. Many students offered specific insight into how IEU support had

assisted them, while other students spoke generally of the IEU influencing their decision to stay at university: “GUMURRII study services and tutoring has made study a lot easier. I deferred and considered not coming back. But I felt with the assistance I could get through the last of my degree.” Participants indicated that they felt more confident as a result of the support and encouragement from IEU staff and the positive effect that engagement with the IEU has had on their studies.

The GUMURRII team have been so supporting and encouraging throughout my degree. I was encouraged to apply for scholarships due to personal financial difficulties with clinical placement. With this help, I was able to relax and concentrate on my studies, without trying to work a ridiculous amount of hours and attend placement.

The progression onto postgraduate study was also attributed to the support received from the IEU and from the university: “GUMURRII and the support at Griffith heavily influenced my decision to study at Griffith and not at another university; it also influenced my decision to also complete my postgraduate degree here too.” While most students had been assisted by the IEU, 25% of students indicated that support had not influenced their decision to stay at university and very few offered additional details to their answer. Online students were unaware that support was available to them, and they had not been contacted by anyone from the IEU to advise them further. Other students had not needed any support or had never considered leaving university. Furthermore, it was highlighted that it was not support, but just having the unit and a place to go as a factor in their decision to stay at university.

Students were asked whether they had or would encourage other students to access GUMURRII and if so, what they would do or say. Most participants (59.63%) had already encouraged other students to access the IEU and a further 38.53% of participants would if they had the opportunity to do so. Only two participants indicated that they would not

encourage other students to access the IEU. Many students spoke to family, friends, and community to advise them of what the IEU can offer them to assist in their success at university.

My granddaughter is starting uni next year. We have had many yarns about GUMURRII, and she knows she can feel safe and supported as she starts her new direction in life. I have spoken to different ones in the community about how helpful GUMURRII is and how we are a family.

Students identified that they would share their own experiences of success and opportunities they have had, as well as how they have used the facilities, resources, and support available.

The support is something that can make an entire difference, the facilities on the Gold Coast campus and the tutoring are exceptional. Also, as a student printing and computer access can be hard on campus but the centre has all the resources needed to spend most study days here.

Participants also indicated that the supportive community environment was a drawcard for students. They explained that the IEU is a place you can go to ask questions, belong, and meet other students in your programs. Responses also suggested that if they had the opportunity, they would walk new students to the unit to see the space themselves, “Show them the spaces in person, as well as forward GUMURRII achievements, events and opportunities to other students.” Survey participants suggested that by sharing their experiences, stories, and achievements, more First Peoples students could be encouraged to access the IEU.

The remaining open-ended questions allowed for students to provide as much or as little detail in their response as they chose. In the next question, students were asked what the best thing was that the IEU had done to assist with their studies. Themes identified in student responses to this question were tutoring/ academic support, cultural support, inclusivity and opportunities.

As indicated previously, tutoring was an important factor in student success and academic achievement. Many students attributed their success to the tutoring that they had received throughout their studies: “GUMURRII organised a tutor for me when I was struggling in one of my science courses [sic]. I am very thankful for this because if I didn't get access to a tutor, I would have failed my course.” In addition to improved academic achievement, students mentioned that their tutor improved their connection with university and motivated them to study. “Being in my first Trimester/first time at Uni, having a tutor has been a massive help and encouraged me to continue my studies.”

Students spoke of how the IEU facilitates a connection to culture and community, especially for those students who have travelled to attend university and may be away from their communities: “Coming from Thursday Island I have lived in a strong community environment my whole life and having something similar at uni definitely assists in being settled and comfortable at uni”. Students further identified that connection and cultural support contributed to their success and engagement with their studies. It was important for students to have a yarn with staff and other students and to have somewhere they can discuss their courses and any concerns safely without judgement.

As an older male, it is important for me to be able to connect with other Indigenous men that are of similar age or older and to know that these people are available should I need to yarn about anything, black ways, while I am on campus.

It was clear that students felt welcome in the IEU and that there was a sense of family, inclusion, and connection. The place allowed students to have not only a place to study with the resources they need but also somewhere they could socialise and connect with likeminded students.

The unit is like a home away from home for me at uni. To keep in routine I arrive 8-9 everyday and walking in there everyday to see familiar faces, that have the same or similar values, builds a sense of community which not only assist with academics, but

also just someone to be able to talk to about things, such as the struggles of uni or just simply going to get lunch with everyone or a coffee.

Some also highlighted that they could not just name one thing: that there have been many experiences throughout their journey where GUMURRII has assisted their studies.

There have been a couple of really important points that have helped me during my journey. Initially, HandsUp! allowed me to connect with students who on a similar journey, many whom I would consider myself to be still close to. Secondly, I since just after first semester, first year, I was challenged with some health issues. My SSO was able to support me in receiving the appropriate recognition of my condition and also point me in the direction of services that I didn't realise were available. Thirdly, being able to attend a conference, sponsored by GUMURRII has given me the drive to continue on with my education, even though I am facing some pretty tough challenges at the moment.

It was also evident that GUMURRII had facilitated some important opportunities for students, whether it was coming to university initially, attendance at conferences, or the progression to postgraduate study. Students identified that as a result of their engagement and initial contact with the IEU they were able to begin their higher education journey. "I enrolled into uni when I was 58yrs old and as a mature aged student GUMURRII has provided me an opportunity to attend through direct entry. That is why I am so grateful." Students recognised that the IEU presented them with an opportunity to study as well as to be successful and enhance their tertiary experience.

Students were asked what GUMURRII could improve on to assist further with their studies. This aspect was highlighted in the identification of three themes in the responses: higher degree research (HDR) and postgraduate support; activities and engagement; and facilities and resources.

It was identified that support for HDR and postgraduate coursework students had previously been provided by designated staff at the Gold Coast and Nathan campuses; however, postgraduate support was currently provided by a single staff member. Students had commented that unless this staff member was on their campus, they did not feel like they were sufficiently supported by the SSOs. Some students had completed their undergraduate study at Griffith and progressed to postgraduate study. These students identified that while support had met their needs at an undergraduate level, they felt that support for postgraduate students did not meet their needs: “GUMURRII was amazing in supporting me during my undergrad but I have felt the HDR student support had been lacking.” Postgraduate students identified that if appropriate and targeted support for them was available, it would have a positive impact on their studies.

Students mentioned the need for increased engagement between students and awareness in the broader university. It was suggested that increased awareness within the Griffith community was needed to ensure that all students understood the purpose and support offered by the IEU: “More promotion of what GUMURRII does and what services they offer, how they can help you,” and “Advertise in O-week as well as in first week introductory classes.”

Students also identified that they would like to see an increase in social activities and networking to allow for greater connection with each other. Students valued the opportunity to develop relationships with peers and suggested that networking events be arranged so that they could check in with each other and get to know more students.

Bringing back a large orientation program like hands up will be great for engaging students again. Hands up was where I met most of my friends at uni and allowed me to form a relationship with the students and staff. It was foundational in encouraging me to engage with GUMURRII throughout my degree.

Students identified that the events or programs they had participated in that were facilitated by the IEU, such as the Hands Up! Tertiary Preparation Program, engaged them in their studies with the IEU and provided an opportunity for them to meet friends and staff.

Online students further expressed that if there was a greater promotion or awareness of the IEU they would have been able to access support and the same opportunities as on-campus students. Therefore, students recommended that the IEU increase their engagement efforts with online students.

The final theme identified as a suggestion for improvement was the resourcing and facilities. Students were aware that the physical spaces do vary between campuses. It was suggested that for centres that were older, or were repurposed spaces, they be purposefully built or redesigned as proper study spaces. It was also mentioned that upgrading the spaces was necessary to attract more students to use the facilities. Financial support is also included in this section as students identified that they would have liked additional support while they were on placement and to assist purchasing of required study resources. It was proposed that this be managed by equipping the units with communal textbooks so that they can be shared among students in the units. It was also suggested that this may encourage additional students into the units to access these resources. Students also advised that they were happy with the service that GUMURRII was providing and that they did not have any suggestions of how it could be improved.

4.2 Thematic Analysis of Interviews

The interview data provided insight into the experiences of First Peoples university students and their access and engagement with the IEU. Following the coding process detailed at the beginning of this chapter, the following sections present the themes identified from the data: Making the connection; Being part of a community; Accessing opportunities;

Utilising resources; Contribution to success; and Student recommendations. **Table 4.1** provides examples of coding, and definitions of the themes identified from the transcripts.

Table 4.1

Example of Interview Coding

	Codes	Grouping codes	Themes
1	Was a kinship carer for two grandchildren who were in high school who weren't engaging with school. Instead of only encouraging them to study, decided to enrol in university to set an example.	Set an example for others Linked to GUMURRII Found GUMURRII after starting Found GUMURRII through talking to other students on campus	Reason for connection
2	Wanted to show grandchildren that education was possible		
3	I found GUMURRII after I started.		
4	I didn't even know about GUMURRII. No one told me		
5	I was speaking with other students		

Interview participants identified common reasons for accessing and engaging with GUMURRII and shared many similar feelings or descriptions of their engagement with the IEU. The key points and quotes that define each theme are reported in this section.

4.2.1 Making the Connection

Telling of stories and introduction of one's self and history is an important part of cultural protocol. Within the interviews it allowed for participants to familiarise themselves with the interview space and commence the conversation in an area they are knowledgeable about and confident to discuss. Each participant introduced themselves and nominated what

they were studying and were given the opportunity to share their reason or motivation for coming to study at university. Students were also asked to share how they initially became aware of the IEU, or why they originally chose to access and engage with available services.

Reasons for undertaking university study varied among students, with some coming to study with a career in mind or to gain further knowledge in their existing profession, and even with sponsorship from their employer: “So I came to uni with a career already in mind. I knew that I wanted to go into psychology and wanted to at least be therapist” (Participant 3). Others followed their interests: “I love politics and I thought, ‘I’m going to go to university.’ So I did. So I’m here doing Indigenous studies and political science” (Participant 2). It was also clear that there was a desire to improve First Peoples communities, or even to show their family that university study was possible. “I went to university to set an example, to show them I could do it, to set a good example for my grandchildren and younger daughter” (Participant 1).

The survey had asked students to identify why they had originally connected with the IEU and students were given an opportunity to expand on this during the interviews. As previously indicated, approximately 30% of First Peoples students at Griffith regularly access and engage with GUMURRII. This occurs through a combination of promotion and engagement activities facilitated by GUMURRII staff, word of mouth, and students actively seeking out the IEU. Data collected through the interviews supported the survey findings. Students had connected with the IEU prior to commencement of study, “GUMURRII messaged me, they contacted me before I had even put my preferences in order” (Participant 4). GUMURRII staff contact all First Peoples who receive an offer to study at Griffith: Enrolment assistance is offered and all commencing students are invited to a preorientation program or event.

I applied through QTAC and I didn't know anything about the GUMURRII unit.

Because I had enrolled as an Indigenous student, then they sent me an email to say when you arrive come to the orientation. So I did that. And then I found out that there's a GUMURRII Centre or that there was a student centre. And I think I've lived there ever since. (Participant 2)

The orientation or preparation program allowed students to develop a relationship with their cohort and settle in before classes started.

So when I came to Griffith I went through the Hands Up program, so I had a two-week orientation before I had started any classes or anything and I got to meet my cohort and really got to know them well. (Participant 3)

Students identified that this program allowed them to build upon their academic capability, to connect with the university, the unit, and First Peoples staff, and also their peers with whom they commenced their studies.

It was mentioned that even through the use of university designated email addresses was preferred, students may not check these and might miss key information as all correspondence is in the form of emails to their student email account.

I'm very much emails. But I look at the Griffith email probably once every two weeks because I've got four other email addresses and my work one is my primary one.

That's what I'm on all the time. I tell people, "If you want to catch me, send me an email at work". (Participant 8)

Although many students were shown to connect with the IEU, students also commenced classes without an understanding or awareness of it. "I didn't know there was one at all. I went on to the portal and was just looking at stuff and there was something on the portal, the GUMURRII Centre. I thought, ah, cool" (Participant 5). It also took some time for other students to discover the IEU. Another participant mentioned that she only found

GUMURRII 3 months after she had started studying by speaking with other students; however, as soon as she found out, she made an effort to connect.

A few participants had preexisting knowledge or understanding of GUMURRII and they mentioned family members who had studied at Griffith and accessed GUMURRII. Those students had passed on how their experience was and as a result inspired these current students to study at Griffith. Another participant directly enrolled at Griffith because of word of mouth and the positive support that was offered by GUMURRII for First Peoples students. Previous experience with GUMURRII as an undergraduate student was another factor why some of the participants continued to connect with GUMURRII in postgraduate study, even though they are now experienced students.

There were many events or points of contact that facilitated students' connection with GUMURRII. For some students it was a friendly welcoming face from a staff member, or encouragement from another student who was already accessing the GUMURRII space on the campus.

I was in a lecture one time and there was a girl sitting by herself down sort of towards me in the front, and you could tell she was a lone wolf and she didn't talk to anyone. And she didn't make any eye contact. And so after the class I thought I'll just start a conversation with her because she looks like she needs a friend. And turns out that she was Indigenous, and she'd been going here for a year and just never come up here (to GUMURRII). (Participant 6)

Understanding the reasons why students access GUMURRII and the broader university in general can assist in understanding their decisions to continue to engage with the IEU throughout their studies. Motivation is a contributing factor in success, so understanding motivation to study and access GUMURRII could be beneficial in student success.

4.2.2 *Being Part of a Community*

This theme was identified in all of the interview transcripts, with students expressing a feeling of belonging or being a part of the GUMURRII community. As outlined through the survey and by the previous themes, Griffith's First People students are diverse; however, being a part of GUMURRII unites them. Many students identified that GUMURRII provided a space for them to be welcomed and that it felt like they were part of a family. This feeling of family enabled students to deepen their connection with their own studies and enhance their student experience, which ultimately contributed to their success.

But I guess one of the greatest things that I got out of initially coming to uni was creating those new bonds, those new support systems. I think it would've been really difficult for me to come to uni and not have that. Because I moved from Logan to the Gold Coast, I moved away from my family at 17, I didn't really know anyone except for my cousin and so coming to uni.... My experience was just immediately being accepted into this lovely community of GUMURRII and forming these really great support systems that really helped me throughout my first few years at uni.

(Participant 3)

But I've got to say that knowing that everyone was there when I got to uni, even for five minutes, just to have a quick coffee, then go off to lectures and stuff, it was like a second home, my home for study. (Participant 9)

Students spoke about how the IEU staff had welcomed them and facilitated the sense of community and safety that they felt, "Just having a place to go and just ask silly questions that you wouldn't email someone about, like how do I access this or who do I talk to for that?" (Participant 3). The importance of having staff who were approachable and accessible whenever students required was also a prevalent message. "You never worry about approaching any of them. They're so open and friendly. They're like having aunties really.

Yeah, you can go in there and just ask whatever” (Participant 4). IEU staff were viewed as welcoming and important in providing assistance and guidance for the students.

GUMURRII was described as the place to go when students needed some additional clarification. It seems the assistance they have already received encourages them to continually engage:

There's no two ways about it. When you're studying over 3 years, you're going to have challenges and if you feel safe going to a place and you feel supported, then you're going to be able to continue to get to that place when you're challenged, when you're really struggling. (Participant 10)

Networks and relationships between students also contributed to the feeling of community that all participants spoke about. Networks referred to friendships, study groups, career networking, mentoring, and generally supporting each other through the journey of study.

I was in GUMURRII Centre all the time when I was in the undergrad. Yeah. But like I said, now, it's actually about relationships and networks and things like that for me and accessing the resource that way for that purpose. I have, of course, accessed the GUMURRII Centre since being here, not only to address the social aspect of uni life, but also, they have resources that are good to access. They're not necessarily material resources, but knowledge resources and various meetings and what have you that they have there that I'm interested in. It's an important networking hub for me in that way. (Participant 7)

I like community, which is strange. I'm fairly introverted in a lot of ways. I need my recharge time. I spend a lot of time by myself, at home just recharging. But I like that community, I like like-minded people who are ... I get a lot of pride out of us seeing a lot of the other students achieve and actually complete degrees and do well at their stuff. I get a lot out of that. (Participant 10)

The importance of having a peer network was identified. Students found they were more motivated to study when they were around their peers in the unit. Students would often

ask each other questions or seek advice from one another. Through these conversations, students were often more than willing to share their experience or advice. There was great sharing of knowledge and experiences, and it is the passing down of stories which occurred so frequently. Whether it was student advice or being able to have discussions on topics that were not within a student's program area, GUMURRII's learning environment facilitates collaboration and fulfils a need for those who have a passion for learning.

I think it really highlights how much of a community it is and I think it really does embody a lot of Indigenous values of that sense of community, that sense of togetherness and that type of stuff. It doesn't matter if you're in a different discipline in a different year doing a completely different pathway. We're all still, as students there for each other and really there to help each other which isn't something you really get anywhere else in uni. (Participant 3)

So, like I said to one of the guys in GUMURRII, "So what are you doing? I'm so confused. I've got this one due and that one due." And he said, "What you do, you get your student guild calendar and you write which ones are due and when they're due and then you work a week back from them." I'm like, "Okay, cool." (Participant 2)

Just chatting to the other students in the rooms, that's basically where I've got all my information from. (Participant 8)

Students at university often develop networks with students who study in their programs or the same courses. Within the IEU there are students studying together from a range of disciplines, which does not often happen in other spaces.

It's so interesting and I think it's really inspiring too to see, or here's a nursing student that just went on placement and they're talking about their placement or an education student talking about their placement or the assignment that this design student has done. And it's really interesting, that's something you don't really get anywhere else because you don't really get that mesh between different disciplines like you do at GUMURRII. (Participant 2)

Yeah, but a lot of us know each other. And many of them are law students, and the social work students and the human service students, the med students, we all sit in there and chat. (Participant 1)

In the library, if you just tapped on someone's shoulder, they might not help. You might not ever see that person again. But when you have a centre, you'll see those people again or they'll come past and go, "How'd you go with that?" You're like, "Oh, yeah. It went really well." (Participant 2)

It was also highlighted that GUMURRII creates a strong sense of belonging and that students could see themselves in each other. They could “surround yourself with like-minded people” (Participant 6). It was evident that they were sharing the journey of education.

I've been to the other student study centres and I think there's something about taking the same space every day or seeing the same faces that you know that you're not alone and you're not a stranger. (Participant 2)

I wasn't the only one anymore. it was like heaps of people had been adopted and fostered. I didn't know that before. I felt isolated. (Participant 1)

You're also being recognized as an expert in your experience, therefore you're not feeling as, "I shouldn't be here." You're made to feel that what you've experienced, you're the expert in what you experience, therefore all the things you feel and the knowledge you bring to it is actually valid, and it's validated by others who you do respect because they've gone through this whole big process to get to that point. (Participant 10)

The GUMURRII community is built upon the foundation of cultural safety and cultural awareness.

I guess the whole cultural safety aspect of it. I think it's really important to have an area that is culturally safe, where you can have a yarn about certain topics that non-Indigenous people aren't going to always understand or appreciate. (Participant 3)

Students may seek GUMURRII out to assist with developing their own cultural connections:

“I've learned more about culture and country being connected with GUMURRII than what I knew before” (Participant 1).

My family were over in WA when I started uni, so I was like back here. Yeah, okay, let's go. But it was just so good to have that support there and to just be in a safe spot where you can easily make friends. (Participant 7)

Other students felt that the space was safe to discuss Western views and teachings without any judgement.

If you're feeling homesick for country, talking to your White friend in your degree that you've only known for a couple months, you might not be comfortable with that and you might not get the response that you want, they might not understand that concept and so having a place where you can really talk about those really specific experiences that people struggle with understanding if they're not Indigenous.

(Participant 3)

This further allowed a First Peoples perspective to be added to the university teachings and further engaged students with their course content and studies.

A lot of the times you're the first person going from your family. So you don't have that background or the education. And also doing psychology, a lot of it was very European. So you sort of going back and going, "Well, how's this going to take into community." So you had that space to just to discuss that, a safe place where you didn't feel like anyone was being put down or anything like that. (Participant 9)

While, overwhelmingly, students felt GUMURRII provided a sense of belonging, it was also discovered that students experienced isolation or rejection from other university services.

Like I went and had a meeting with the First Year Advisor. I found out we had a First Year Advisor. I didn't know what First Year Advisor meant until I had saw her in one of our lectures and then I went, "Oh great, I'll go and talk to that person." I went and chatted to her and she was just like, "Oh you really should go back to GUMURRII

and have a chat to the SSO." I'm just thinking, "Are you kidding me? Isn't that your job?" (Participant 8)

And everyone's in there working. Sometimes you'll have people in there having a chat, but that's fine. But when you go into the library or the other student centres, they're working but they're really closed off working. So they're not talking and you're not just not getting inspired. You just feel lonely in them. (Participant 2)

GUMURRII provided a strong sense of community and facilitated connections with peers and staff that were able to contribute to the students' success and positively impact their tertiary experience.

4.2.3 *Accessing Opportunities*

The third theme that emerged from the interviews related to opportunities that were facilitated by students' involvement with GUMURRII. Opportunities were either presented to students by GUMURRII staff, or other First Peoples students within the unit discussed and promoted these based on their own experiences. One such program is the Kungullanji Program, which is promoted to students through GUMURRII. Often, GUMURRII staff directly approach students within the unit to participate in the program.

So I've done the research projects every year since I've been here. I've done it three times. And loved it and learnt so much from it. (Participant 6)

Yes, it's not only that, it's the rising of GPAs, the knowledge people are taking out into the workforce. It's just amazing. I love the Kungullanji program. (Participant 10)

In addition to participating in programs themselves, participants spoke of the rewarding opportunity to mentor and give back to other First Peoples students. Three specifically mentioned their involvement as mentors in the Kungullanji Summer Research Program:

I'm mentoring at the moment for the summer research project. (Participant 1)

I definitely always try to come in to give back and I think that's why I've come in as a mentor for the Kungullanji program to give back to those students who are interested in research. (Participant 3)

People ask me about the Kungullanji project, and often talking to them about ... I actually talked another student into doing that. (Participant 6)

I'm also mentoring Kungullanji, which is a research fellowship over the summer.
(Participant 10)

Another mentoring opportunity that was discussed was the involvement of current students as mentors. This was formalised through their involvement in orientation and preparation programs and informally as a guide to commencing students.

I am mentoring with Hands Up this year too. I'm one of the leads with that.
(Participant 10)

They just give you the tips that you need. Like, "Don't bother going to this," or, "Make sure you go to this," or, "Make sure you talk to this person," or, "Email this person." Particularly ones who are in the business, because I've been talking primarily to people in the same faculty, but they're just giving really great tips. (Participant 8)

All First Peoples students receive information from GUMURRII staff. This information is often viewed in more depth by students who are in regular contact with GUMURRII and staff. Opportunities such as overseas experiences are one such piece of information that is passed on to students. One participant spoke about the study tour they were about to embark upon with another GUMURRII student and highlighted that opportunities were the most important thing about GUMURRII:

And going back to that question earlier, the most important thing for me right now with GUMURRII is the opportunities, but the internal ones with people and the external ones with study tours. (Participant 4)

This leads on to another key topic raised in relation to opportunities, and this was the real-world connections or preparedness for work that was facilitated by contacts within GUMURRII.

Only last week I was back at campus, I was boom swinger for a short Indigenous comedy with some really well-known Indigenous actors from the area. Bang, the contact's there. I've got two actors for my film now. (Participant 4)

Furthermore, students were presented with opportunities they may not have previously considered when they initially enrolled at Griffith, such as a career in academia or postgraduate study. Conversations with academic staff were easier to have when GUMURRII could facilitate these.

Just sitting and having a conversation with those (academics), I felt qualified to be able to do that because I've sat and had those conversations before. It's not as daunting to do that, whereas to try and do that with academics in other fields, you're made to feel inferior and feeling that way stops you from wanting to get to that point. Makes you think you can't get to that point. And having that proximity to them and access to them, to the academics through GUMURRII, via GUMURRII as the conduit, really is important in the students actually progressing. (Participant 10)

The experiences that students had in taking on these additional opportunities, or being aware of what was possible, have given them a real sense of ability to make change and an impact once they had finished their degrees. It was clear that there was a sense of improved confidence based on these experiences that complemented their degrees.

4.2.4 *Utilising Resources*

Access to resources that are provided by GUMURRII was another key theme that emerged during the interviews as a factor that contributes to student engagement.

Supplementary resources such as tutoring, and the physical space and its inclusions such as computers, meeting rooms, and printing, were regularly mentioned as adding benefit to the

students' experience and academic progress. It was evident that students appreciated the resources that were on offer.

And then I've always had tutors. Honestly, every semester I come here and I think, oh, I'm so grateful to even have this space to come and be in. When I walk through the library and it's just packed, chock-a-block full of people and no computers available. And it's really a sanctuary for us. And I am always grateful. (Participant 6)

It was clear from the discussion that the assistance students had received from tutors that was directly facilitated by GUMURRII staff is invaluable.

The tutoring that they provide as well through ATSITAP or ITAS as it used to be called. That's been really supportive. (Participant 3)

Students may access GUMURRII for this resource only. In many instances, students found that the experience of tutoring was beyond their initial expectation.

I've had a tutor and that help is just massive because I didn't know that was possible. And I'm flapping about when I first got there and a girl said to me like, "Do you need a tutor?" And I'm like, "What's a tutor?" And they go "Someone that's going to help you get through the subject or someone that's going to support you through the subject." I'm like, "Really? Okay." I had no idea. So then this lady arrived and then she said, "Okay, this is what we can do and that's what we can do." (Participant 2)

I thought I was going to get a tutor that just wasn't film and just was going to help me with more general stuff like writing and spelling and things like that, but she is an Indigenous filmmaker. (Participant 4)

GUMURRII facilities vary on each campus; however, students across the campuses utilised each space and appreciated the access to the room, computers, and facilities, including swipe card access and after-hours access to the units.

I think I'm really privileged to have come to uni at a point where that Centre was here. It was pretty much brand new, only a couple of years old. It really is designed in

a way that's culturally welcoming and safe and the whole atmosphere and the vibe that you get from GUMURRII is really something special. (Participant 3)

Just having a safe space for people to gather, I think. I don't feel that this campus here has the support, or probably more intense support. I don't have a relationship with the resources. I know that sounds really impersonal, but the staff here that see me down there, and I think that's literally because I'm really time poor and I'm not full time. Not that I don't go and say hi and whatnot and we can have a chat and stuff, but I think for me, personally, it's having that space because if that space wasn't there, then how else would we connect with other people? (Participant 8)

We've got cards to get in at 11 o'clock at night if we happen to be there at that time. (Participant 10)

I feel that the way it's set out at the Gold Coast is really beneficial. I've been into a couple of other GUMURRIIs, and the desks are more around the outside, whereas we've got those lovely lines in the middle. So you're sort of facing someone. And if you hear someone over there go, "Oh!" Like this, you go, "You all right?" So we can check in easier. (Participant 1).

A distance education student mentioned their eagerness to use the space if they had the opportunity based upon their experience with GUMURRII remotely.

Because I definitely would've taken advantage of being able to use the computers, and all the other things that you guys do, and catch up some stuff out. It looked right. Yeah. But as it was I've got a tutor, she was wonderful. (Participant 5)

The computing resources within the unit such as access to free printing and the internet was also incredibly valuable to the students. They clearly mentioned how appreciative of these resources they were.

So it's interesting when I go with my other friends and then I went into another student centre with another friend and I'm like, "It's so noisy in here. How can you think?" She's like, "What do you mean?" And I said, "Well, next week we'll go to

GUMURRII." And she walked in and she's excited I let her in the door and she's like, "Ah, it's heaven." I said, "I know. It's heaven." (Participant 2)

Oh no, we definitely need the computers and the printing. Being able to print stuff and not have to pay for it is unbelievable, that is such a blessing. So definitely the printing and the computers, I mean, it's so much more than just the space, but having that private space we can just go in and it just seems like a safe space and a private space. I don't feel like I'm any different to anyone else, but I do feel like we're really lucky to be able to just be able to shut everything out for a while and come in and just be with other people like you and just be able to talk about certain things that you want to talk about if you feel like it, and just having a separate space is really nice.

(Participant 6)

The physical resources of space and additionally supplementary resources such as tutoring ultimately facilitate student engagement with the unit and have a positive impact on students' progress and achievement within the university. As some students do not have access to a space at home to study, or resources at home to study, the unit ultimately contributes to their success at university.

4.2.5 *Contribution to Success*

In addition to the resources that GUMURRII provides, participants mentioned times when GUMURRII support contributed to their academic progress, success and achievement. Some participants spoke about GUMURRII in general being essential to their experience, and others highlighted the staff having an impact on them directly.

I honestly don't know how far I would have come without the support of the GUMURRII unit. (Participant 6)

I was already was a pretty well achieving student but I think without that support I would've been quite lost and not as focused on where I was going with things. Having those supports was definitely something that I felt was foundational to, I guess my

success at uni. Yeah. So I feel like I've had a really successful go at university, which isn't something that a lot of people have for their first time. (Participant 3)

I don't think I would have continued this far if there was not a GUMURRII centre.

(Participant 2)

I think that's a big positive in the sense that when you identify as a student, when you identify with somewhere, when it becomes a part of who you are, you're more likely to succeed. You're more likely to continue on and when the challenges come, because they do come. (Participant 10)

GUMURRII has made my experience something that I know I will get through.

(Participant 10)

As an off-campus person and digital I got every bit of support that I could have needed. (Participant 5)

During the interviews when participants spoke about how GUMURRII had assisted them, participants mentioned the targeted role that staff play in their success and engagement. They felt valued and that the staff had a genuine interest and investment in their success at university and beyond.

I think the fact that there is that focus on checking in on students, that social factor, it's not just someone calling up to be like, "Why haven't you come to classes?" It's so much quite like, "Are you okay? What's happening? How can we help? How can we support you?" It's actually people who are invested in you. (Participant 3)

But it was just if you've done something or you've misunderstood something, you had the SSO there. And that was good, having the SSO just to sort of say, "Look, I'm not sure about this." And she'd just put you in the right direction straight away. I mean, I'm still getting support from the SSO, even though I've moved up here. So it's, that broader support that you get from the unit. Not a number. Definitely not. (Participant 9)

Whereas for me, I could have gone to other places. There was one down in New South Wales where I was planning on moving to go to, but it was the fact that GUMURRII reached out to me straightway, that unit, and were so excited to have me. Like, "Oh my God, you're going to be a filmmaker. We need that." So I think it's important because they know your worth more than someone else would. (Participant 4)

While it was clear that the participants valued the personal acknowledgement of GUMURRII SSOs, participants also discussed the direct ways in which staff have made their experience at university more positive and ultimately more successful. SSOs contributed to students staying at university by facilitating discussions with broader university staff and assisting with processes and procedures.

Yeah, I like how the SSOs really facilitate some of those uncomfortable things that you might have to do. If you have to have a meeting with someone about ... I've known other students that have had failures and academic strikes on their records and things like that. And the SSOs stepped in to mediate that situation and be like, "They had ABC going on in their life," and helping them get that, I guess consideration that they deserve because sometimes the administration can be really horrible to deal with. (Participant 3)

If something's going wrong in the unit and you can see it's not right, there's someone you can access who will then take it on. Because sometimes those things can make students just go, "I'm not coming back. I'm done. This is just not for me". (Participant 2)

The thing is with the GUMURRII centre is it really is about support in every way because study is a solo journey, and nobody else supports you. So when you're at uni, it's the first ... well, certainly one of the first contacts that I made because it was a resource that I could access. But I was doing it solo, you know? And we all do it solo. Like I said at the beginning ... it's kind of gone around full circle now.... Nobody is

really interested in you until you've made a mark in terms of got a piece of paper, or really done the hard yards in that regard. And GUMURRII are there from the start, supporting you through in every way. (Participant 7)

4.2.6 *Student Recommendations*

Participants were asked if there was anything else that GUMURRII could do to assist their success at university. Students had a number of suggestions that could be added, or things that were missing from their experience at Griffith. Additionally, suggestions that were made in relation to increasing student engagement with the unit and the university are included within this theme.

Postgraduate support was mentioned as an area for improvement. It was noted that there was a designated postgraduate support staff member who was previously based at the Gold Coast campus in addition to the one who was then only based at Nathan campus.

Well, something that the Gold Coast GUMURRII used to have but doesn't have any more is a senior SSO position for HDR students. So they used to be a postgraduate SSO, and when she stepped down from that role, it was never filled in. But when it comes to issues with supervision or having to deal with your HDR convenor or other nitty-gritty issues, I've found that support hasn't been as available. So I think an area improvement would potentially be HDR support. (Participant 3)

The impact of the community and belonging on students was previously highlighted. Building on from this, it was suggested that the Hands Up! Tertiary Preparation Program be reinstated, rather than having a single campus orientation.

Well, exactly and I think any staff member of GUMURRII would probably say that having to get rid of Hands Up! was bad idea. Because I feel like that was a really foundational moment for me in coming to uni because it's where I did form a lot of those relationships. And I think it really got me to engage with the unit because I realized how fantastic it was. I think for some students coming to uni and coming to a

one- or two-day orientation where they just see it, they might not think that you don't realize the breadth of support and knowledge that you can gain from engaging with the unit. (Participant 3)

Mentoring was mentioned several times by numerous participants as being a valuable experience and opportunity for them during their studies. It was further suggested this could be more formalised.

I'm just thinking if they targeted more mature age students and we had more here, the campus would be busier as well. And I just think it would be a more of a lively place. And then if you say to them you need to mentor, not need to, but they say to the older students, it's really good idea to mentor someone younger in first year. I just think we could give back so much as well, like the men sheds and stuff like that. (Participant 6)

Another idea was that a designated drop in mentor would be beneficial to allow students someone to go to other than staff who may be assisting another student with more complex matters. It was stated that one of the tutors who was frequently in the unit was invaluable as a mentor.

Not just during her tutoring hours, but supporting students just with general editing, stuff like that. I know the SSO's there too, but she's busy with other stuff at times. It's just that person who has a bit of experience themselves, some mentoring and supporting the students. (Participant 10)

Programs and opportunities were highlighted as a separate theme; however, navigation toward these opportunities, further study, and careers was noted as a potential addition. Participants benefited from the experience of other students and staff to assist them navigate their own university journey. It was suggested that having a designated person to assist with careers and pathway mapping would be of great benefit to students. It could involve bridging the gap between program directors to ensure students meet the criteria for further study or assisting with career advice.

Someone who could give careers advice and mapping those pathways. I know we've got people at the university, but again, the accessing of that by Indigenous students is, I think, you'll find very few and far between. It's hard enough just to get into see a careers advisor as it is. If you're a bit hesitant to tap into that mainstream system, waiting for an appointment for that is just something you're not going to do and you're just not going to engage in it. And maybe be someone who's really well versed in the ... I know. I've actually gone through with a few students and helped them map out their pathways to graduation because they haven't actually looked at that fully. I know in psych you've got to do a minor now, and some people haven't taken that into consideration. To do honours, you've got to do a minor. And it's like, "Well how does that work now?" kind of thing. (Participant 10)

The next suggestion could almost be a theme in itself as it was spoken about so extensively and connected with most of the other key issues that have been raised in some way. Participants felt that there seemed to be a severe lack of awareness about, or understanding of, what GUMURRII does within the broader university. This was linked back to lack of cultural safety in the broader university and respect of First Peoples' values and practices within the institution. Suggestions here related to improving awareness, improving understanding, and embedding cultural support, perspectives, and knowledge across the university.

If I'm being really critically honest about the rest of the university, I think having a GUMURRII space is almost a tokenistic gesture because there's nothing else to support it. While I don't undervalue it, absolutely it's the most important thing for me, there is zero support from what I can see outside in the general community that supports GUMURRII to what it needs to be supported. Because as soon as you say you're Indigenous people go, "Oh yeah, go to GUMURRII." And it's basically like, "I don't need to help you because you've got people to help yourself". (Participant 7)

This was raised and discussed within a focus group and the other participants agreed this was a shared experience. They felt that some staff did not want to hear about their concerns or issues because, as a First Peoples student, they should go to GUMURRII for assistance. This contributed to the feeling of isolation, as reported in Section 4.2.2 by the first year student who went to their First Year Advisor, and as soon as it was discovered that the student was Indigenous, the First Year Advisor referred them back to GUMURRII instead.

It was also suggested that GUMURRII needs a stronger representation within the university.

But I walked in (to Griffith Orientation Week) and I asked the student table there, the volunteers there, I said, "Which way is to the GUMURRII unit?" And they just went, "What's that?". So I just came straight to the Quad and I went to the help desk and I said, "Can you just point me in the way of the GUMURRII unit?" And they went, "What's that?" And then I went, "It's the Indigenous place." And they went, "Oh yeah, I've heard of that.". Like if everybody knows what the Sir Samuel Griffith building is, everyone knows what Patience Thoms is, why is GUMURRII not a name known like that? (Participant 8)

A further improvement following on from this was “Thinking about it from the point of view of Murri students” (Participant 10), by incorporating more First Peoples’ points of view within the university, more inclusion such as Acknowledgements of Country, and inclusion of key cultural dates other than NAIDOC.

And then why do we only celebrate NAIDOC week? Why are the other significant dates on our calendar not on GU's calendar? And why are we not embedding this in? There's no acknowledgement to countries in lectures. Why not? (Participant 8)

The final group of suggestions related to increasing student engagement with GUMURRII and with the university in general. One of the engagement strategies aligned with one of the themes previously discussed – Belonging. Students spoke of belonging as a

key reason why they continue to engage with GUMURRII. When students see someone like them or with similar goals, a sense of belonging is created. It was suggested that there could be students at the beginning of each trimester attending lectures to promote the unit.

You could get students, the ones that feel comfortable, don't even have to be mature aged students, but the ones that feel comfortable in their skin to promote the unit. Just put it in a way so that it's like a meeting place or a go-to place for any help that you might need. And just for a couple of minutes, and just tell them where it is and some of the stuff we do. And how it's a great support network. And I just think networking is everything. And to have it here I think is really, it's fantastic and it's vital.

(Participant 6)

This could be beneficial, as not all students were aware of GUMURRII when they commenced and had to find the unit themselves.

I didn't know there was one [an IEU] at all. I went on to the portal and was just looking at stuff and there was something on the portal, the GUMURRII Centre. I thought, ah, cool. Of course there has to be some sort of support. (Participant 5)

A number of strategies for engaging with current students was also suggested.

I think engagement, just colloquially, from what I've seen has probably dropped the last couple of years. I remember when I first started, used to have to fight for a computer. It used to be full all the time. And I found it hasn't really been like that the last couple of years. It's rarely ever like overcrowded. Which I guess I personally would maybe think might have to do with them having gotten rid of the orientation program that they originally had. They cut it down from 2 weeks to 1 week and then it was just a day or two. (Participant 3)

It'd be cool if there were other ways, like more engaging ways of them to get events and activities out there. Like now and then they might do a flyer or a poster on the walls if it's a bigger thing. Yeah. (Participant 4)

Opportunities for networking events were also suggested.

I think networking events would be amazing. (Participant 8)

I think more cultural events and they set up just more regular events where the people can gather around for food and talk and stuff like that. Nothing big deal, but just some sandwiches and stuff and we just catch up and everything, because not all students....

Because they're paying their bills and everything like that. And trying to pay their rent. And maybe just to make sure maybe once a week or something that they can all have some food and that usually gets the yarning process going, where they can talk about stuff. (Participant 9)

The final suggestion follows on from networking with current students to focus on increasing awareness and engagement with the community and potential students. It was suggested this could be by hosting on-campus events or allowing potential high school students to come and visit the campus. They would then be able to see what study would be like and perhaps motivate themselves to come to university and engage with GUMURRII.

I think we've kicked it over, haven't we? What do we do? Why do you think it's important to have an Indigenous education unit like GUMURRII, well, you know why I think it's important. Engagement. Not just for older people like me, but how we can flow the information out about the unit, and how many people we can bring in. And also for our children, and our friend's children. But just that feeling of belonging. (Participant 1)

The findings from this study were reported from the online survey and the themes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups. The perspective of a large number of students was gained through the survey that covered Contact; Use of facilities and resources; Relationships; and Open-ended questions. Six themes were identified from the interviews and focus groups: Making the connection; Being part of a community; Accessing opportunities; Utilising resources; Contribution to success; and Student recommendations.

Possible limitations to this study are discussed next, followed by a thorough discussion of the findings in Chapter 5.

4.3 Limitations

This research was conducted as a requirement of the Master of Education and Professional Studies Research program. Study in this program was planned to be undertaken part-time over 2 years and therefore time constraints may have influenced the data collection and sample size. Additionally, obtaining ethical approval took 5 months due to the in-depth consultation that was required. Therefore, possible limitations to this research include the timeframe in which to conduct the study, the sample size, and the variation of participants within the sample. The response rate may be a limitation of this project because of the timeframe allowed to collect the data. The response rate may have been affected by the survey being deployed at the end of Trimester 2, when many students were not frequently checking their student email due to preparing for end of trimester assessment and exams. Only First Peoples students at Griffith University were invited to participate in this research. Because only approximately 17% of students participated in this research, it is acknowledged that this information does not represent the whole of Griffith's First Peoples student population. Time constraints may further have limited the number or the duration of the interviews. Each Griffith campus is unique, and this is reflected in the student cohort at each campus, which could pose a limitation as it may not reflect the broader First Peoples' population. Whilst the majority of participating students have lived and/or currently reside in the South East Queensland region during their studies, their family backgrounds and cultural connections tie them to many other parts of the state and Australia. The sample draws upon a higher proportion of mature-aged tertiary students than are enrolled at other institutions, as 66% of First Peoples students at Griffith are mature aged. This figure varies across different

Australian universities but historically, as a cohort, First Peoples at university tend to be mature aged rather than Year 12 leavers (Asmar et al., 2011).

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings presented in the previous chapter. Section 5.1 introduces the discussion and the six distinct findings that emerged from this study. The remainder of this chapter discusses the findings in the following sections: Connection and belongingness; Maximising resource potential; and First Peoples' voice in success at university.

5.1 Introduction

This research sought to determine the factors which influence First Peoples students' decisions to access and engage with GUMURRII, in order to improve student engagement with the IEU. Despite evidence that IEUs increase First Peoples students' participation, retention, and success at university, consistently only around 30% of students regularly access and engage with IEUs. The Indigenist research design (K. Martin, 2003; Rigney, 2006) of this case study has sought and enabled interpretation of the lived experiences of First Peoples students to better understand reasons for engagement with IEUs and to explore the impacts upon their ongoing participation and outcomes in higher education. Previous studies in this area have focused on barriers to study, use of supplementary tutoring, and student experiences within higher education. This study is unique in that the nature of and reasoning behind First Peoples student engagement with IEUs has not been widely investigated.

There were six clear findings identified in this study which will be discussed in this chapter, including (a) making the initial connection to GUMURRII, and (b) becoming part of the First Peoples student community. There were findings that were concerned with understanding (c) the full resource potential of GUMURRII, and (d) how to access these resources. Finally, (e) additional factors were identified as contributing to student success, and (f) new, creative suggestions from First Peoples' students were made that should be

pursued. The findings are presented and discussed in three sections: Connection and Belongingness, Maximising Resource Potential, and First Peoples' Voice in Success at University, drawing upon the conceptual language of Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Nakata, 2007a) and Cultural Interface theory (Nakata, 2002; 2007b).

5.2 Connection and Belongingness

Recall from Chapter 2 that Nakata (2002) described the Cultural Interface as:

The place where we live and learn, the place that conditions our lives, the place that shapes our futures and more to the point the place where we are active agents in our own lives – where we make decisions - our lifeworld. (p. 285)

Findings in Chapter 4 identified themes of making the initial connection to GUMURRII and becoming part of the First Peoples student community. This is explored by understanding how a relationship between students and the IEU was developed from initial awareness, through to access and engagement. A space is created where First Peoples students can access support and opportunities which enhance their individual experience of university; thus, the IEU becomes an enabling Cultural Interface for First Peoples students. This section will firstly explore reasons surrounding students' initial connection with GUMURRII and will then examine how this connection evolved to a strong sense of belonging and community.

5.2.1 *Making the Initial Connection to GUMURRII*

The majority of First Peoples students initially contacted the IEU for information on coming to university or for assistance with applying for their chosen degrees. This clearly identified that there are groups of potential IEU users who are already aware of GUMURRII's existence through family, friends, school, community awareness or their own research. Nakata et al. (2017) identified that IEUs have increasingly taken on universities' responsibilities of outreach and pre-entry activities within schools and communities. Students

having an awareness of the IEU at such an early point in their studies may be attributed to Griffith and GUMURRII's effective outreach and community engagement strategies. Another reason why students connected initially could be credited to the fact that participants shared their personal experience with the IEU with their family members, encouraging them to engage when they commenced at university. The findings further support this, as within the broader First Peoples' cohort, 71.3% of students were first in family; however, those who participated in this study were more likely not to be first in family to attend university. Within this study, 40.1% of participants indicated that a family member such as parent or sibling had previously attended university, and there were students who also recommended that other family members study at Griffith. As indicated by some students in the survey, "I have already advised my niece who begins in 2020 to access GUMURRII and when I speak to others about my Uni experience, I am always referring to the support that GUMURRII offer" (Survey Response). Chapter 2 explained that higher education can positively impact First Peoples communities and improve socioeconomic outcomes. As more students follow the footsteps of their family members and access higher education, it challenges past deficit narratives popular in school participation policy and school-based outcomes research, that imply that First Peoples parents and students are not interested in tertiary education. Behrendt et al. (2012) found that First Peoples were more likely to be in VET programs than in higher education. It was also reported that First Peoples have lower aspirations than non-Indigenous Australians to participate in higher education (Behrendt et al., 2012). Results from this study may indicate that there has been a shift in First Peoples' perceptions of higher education, which means IEUs and universities need to reevaluate how they connect with students and communities.

First Peoples students initially accessed the IEU for reasons such as obtaining information on degrees, applying for direct entry or for university application assistance,

requesting tutoring, and responding to GUMURRII staff directly reaching out to them. These reasons align with the traditional role of IEUs to assist First Peoples to access higher education (Bin-Sallik, 2013). Students are more likely to be successful when they are engaged with their studies (Kuh et al., 2008) and having an understanding of what university can offer and what kind of career or life could follow tertiary education can influence one's decision to enrol. As many students inquired about information on the university and their degrees at the point of initial access, it is clear that having this understanding prior to enrolment is a factor in their success and engagement with the IEU. The majority of these students had also made contact before Week 1 of their first trimester at university.

It was further found that most of the of students (83.26%) who participated in this study formed their connection with the IEU before the end of their first trimester. These students therefore had preexisting knowledge of the IEU or learned of it at the commencement of their university journey. Consequently, as there are students who know support is available, promotion of support to these students is not necessarily a factor that may increase student engagement with the IEU.

Accordingly, to increase student engagement, the IEU should consider a stronger focus on activities that are not linked to orientation and the first-year experience. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the university offers a unique undergraduate research experience, the Kungullanji Program. Students in this study spoke of their participation in the Kungullanji Program and how this had enhanced their university experience. This is a unique program that promotes undergraduate students' participation in research which, unlike other honours or research experience pathways, does not have an honours-level GPA as the entry requirement. The IEU should consider expanding this program to more students and/or support similar programs in the faculties that provide opportunities to students whose needs are not being met. Universities offer many programs such as research, exchange, and

internships for high-achieving students; by lowering or removing the GPA requirement, participation could increase and have a positive impact on student engagement and completion. The Behrendt Report recommended that support should meet the students' needs and be integrated into the university's culture. If IEUs established their own programs that removed barriers or negotiated access to these existing programs on the condition of providing additional support, student engagement and outcomes may be improved.

5.2.2 *Becoming Part of the First Peoples' Student Community*

Higher education is a relatively new and contested space for First Peoples students (Nakata, 2007a; Trudgett, 2010). First Peoples may find that their cultural beliefs and viewpoints can separate them from the broader university cohort, and their decision to study at university can isolate students from their families and communities (Barney, 2016). Connection with the IEU assists students to navigate this Cultural Interface (Nakata, 2007b) and GUMURRII is seen as a place of cultural safety within the Western institution. By engaging with the IEU, students are able to become active agents in their own lives and shape their academic journey.

A strong sense of belonging can assist students to be successful in the academy (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). GUMURRII's outreach, engagement, preorientation, and other programs such as the Kungullanji Program allowed students to take charge of their future and learning. Students identified that admission through direct entry and attending the Hands Up! Tertiary Preparation Program facilitated their contact with GUMURRII. These activities developed students' connection with IEU staff and their peers. University needs to feel like a place where First Peoples students belong (Behrendt et al., 2012), and for the students in this study, these connections allowed them to gain a much needed sense of belonging within the institution. By countering the isolation students may be feeling in this new space, they are able to overcome this barrier and continue successfully at university.

As broadly highlighted in previous literature (Barney, 2016; Behrendt et al., 2012; Bin-Sallik, 2003; Fredericks et al., 2015; Nakata et al., 2004; Page et al., 2017), First Peoples students face numerous barriers such as cultural isolation, lack of preparedness, finances, and support, as well as family and community responsibilities, which result in lower participation, retention and success rates at university. First Peoples represent only 1.4% of tertiary students, and there are differences between First Peoples and non-Indigenous student profiles (Asmar et al., 2011; Behrendt et al., 2012). Those students who participated in the survey were typical of these differences in profile in that most were matured aged students (63.5%) and were first in family (59.9%) to attend university, unlike the non-Indigenous student profile. University curriculum is designed for the non-Indigenous student profile and does not take into account the additional responsibilities that many First Peoples students have. GUMURRII is able to assist First Peoples students to meet responsibilities and complete their course requirements. As indicated in Chapter 4, support from GUMURRII meant that students could “relax and concentrate on my studies, without trying to work a ridiculous amount of hours to attend placement” (Survey Response). Anderson et al. (2008) identified that with appropriate support, First Peoples students can be just as successful at university as non-Indigenous students; the support provided by the IEU allowed First Peoples students to engage with the coursework despite their individual circumstances.

Findings also built upon the safe space aspect of GUMURRII, in that students in this study, initially reached out to staff when they had study-related questions. Students felt that it was a safe space for them to ask these questions without judgement or fear. Additionally it was a space where they were valued and able to collaborate (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). This is supported by previous research in that lack of cultural safety within university can play a role in First Peoples students’ decisions to withdraw from study or leave university (Barney, 2016; Bin-Sallik, 2003; Fredericks, 2009a). Bin-Sallik (2003) argued that cultural safety

contributes to success and achievements by empowering individuals, and this is echoed by First Peoples students: “The number one thing that keeps me coming back into GUMURRII, what would it be? I suppose it is cultural safety” (Participant 10).

Furthermore, findings indicate that while the majority of students who engaged with the IEU early on were on-campus students, there appears to be a lack of engagement with online or distance students. Online students often mentioned that they were unaware that support was available to them. When compared to each of the five physical Griffith University campuses, Griffith’s digital campus currently represents the second largest campus enrolment. This pattern is additionally reflected in the broader First Peoples student cohort; however, within the sample of participants, digital enrolments represented only the fourth largest cohort. Lack of awareness of GUMURRII, and the perception that support was only available to on-campus students, was a common point of discussion for online students, as indicated within the responses: “I have not had the opportunity to use the services as I was not aware they were available to online students” (Survey Response). It is therefore necessary to maximise service delivery to include online or off-campus students. As highlighted in the literature review, the university landscape has changed and traditional practices need to be adapted in response, including the need to plan for increased numbers of online students (Goedegebuure et al., 2017). As First Peoples students are more likely to be mature aged and less experienced with technology (Henderson et. al, 2017), the need to ensure support is accessible to online students must be a priority.

It is further possible that students engaged with the IEU because this was the only place in the university where students felt they belonged, as noted in Section 2.7: a development of place attachment. Students felt a stronger connection to GUMURRII than they did to their faculty or broader services, they felt part of a GUMURRII community. Chapter 2 also noted that university support should not rely only on the IEU: it is the

university's responsibility, and support for First Peoples needs to be university wide. The experience of Participant 8 being referred back to the IEU – “Oh you should really go back to GUMURRII” – rather than being assisted by the First Year Advisor is concerning. The First Year Advisor made an assumption about the student's needs based upon their culture rather than academic need (J. Carter et al. 2018). This assumption may come from a place of deficit, meaning that the First Year Advisor automatically assumed this student needed additional support because they are a First Peoples student, or it could be that supporting First Peoples students is still not seen as a university-wide responsibility. From this point on it is possible that the student may not attempt to seek assistance from their faculty and instead rely heavily on the IEU, further separating them from their broader student cohort. J. Carter et al. (2018) identified the importance of similar academic experiences which have the ability to generate “a strong positive or weak negative sense of ‘comfort’ in the overall process of developing a sense of identity, attachment and belonging” (p. 251), meaning that the First Year Advisor's comment had the potential to inhibit the student's development of place attachment.

In addition to referral from faculties, students found that there was also a lack of awareness and understanding of the IEU. Participant 8 spoke of their attempt to find out about the IEU from the main information desk during Orientation Week and was not able to be directed to the unit or be given any information. Student feedback within the survey also echoed this, and that more awareness and connection should be facilitated during orientation. Finally, students found there was lack of connection and community in other areas of the university, so this prompted them to return to the IEU as their primary place on campus to study: they identified GUMURRII as the place that contributes to their success. The students who had accessed other spaces such as computer labs and the library on campus felt closed off and uninspired: “You just feel lonely in them” (Participant 2). Being able to talk and discuss your ideas is another aspect in which IEUs support an Indigenous standpoint while

other spaces do not. Kahu and Nelson (2018) described belonging as the student's connection to the institution, staff, other students, and the discipline being studied. Place-attachment and place-identity was commonly identified in this study: the feeling of connection that the space created was clearly valuable to First Peoples students and contributed to their success at university (J. Carter et al., 2018).

Students identified their various reasons for connecting with the IEU, with most students seeking assistance with information, enrolment, and tutoring, and many students made this connection early on in their studies. A sense of belonging and safety was observed from students who engaged with the IEU. By gaining a deeper understanding of students' connection with the IEU, potential areas for future focus on student engagement to assist with student success have been identified.

5.3 Maximising Resource Potential

It was identified in Chapter 4 that students were frequently utilising the resources provided by the IEU. Within this section, resources refer to the physical resources which are available on each campus, as well as the provision of services, programs and financial support. These themes emerged in Chapter 4 within the survey and interview discussions surrounding how and why students were using the resources available.

Previous research has explained the historical development and purpose of IEUs as being to provide entry and orientation programs as well as personal and academic support including tutoring; to assist students in developing necessary skills for tertiary completion and success; to assist maintenance of cultural identity; and to provide a space to do this (Andersen et al., 2008; Nakata et al., 2004; Trudgett, 2010). This assistance was provided in response to lower participation, retention and success rates of First Peoples students, and it was found that support differs between institutions.

5.3.1 *The Physical Space and Resources*

Findings from this study showed that students were accessing the unit regularly and were consistently using a broad range of services on offer. Many students were coming to the IEU every time, or most times, they came to campus (54.96%). The physical space is one of the ATF proposals that universities have adopted into the present model of IEUs. Within this study, the space allowed a central point for First Peoples students not only to access support and programs provided by the IEU, but allowed for connection with peers and maintenance of cultural identity, as observed in Section 4.2.1. The findings denote that students were grateful for the space that was provided. It was beneficial to have a place where students could access resources and computers to complete their studies, when the library may be “just packed, chock-a-block full of people and no computers available” (Participant 6). Students could also use the space when required: “We've got cards to get in at 11 o'clock at night if we happen to be there at that time” (Participant 10). Social inequality impacts upon participation in higher education (Barney, 2016; Behrendt et al., 2012), so for students who may not have access to a computer, or a quiet place to study at home, accessing the facilities is crucial to their success at university.

The physical resource most utilised at each campus unit was the computers. This included using these only for free printing. The survey identified that computer access was incredibly valuable, with comments such as, “24/7 computer labs hands down the most amazing thing. I don't have home computer, so this is essential and appreciated” (Survey Response). In addition to the computers, having access to free printing in the spaces eased the financial burden associated with printing in other areas on campus: “Also, as a student printing and computer access can be hard on campus but the centre has all the resources needed to spend most study days here” (Survey Response). Finances have been identified as a barrier to tertiary participation for First Peoples students (Barney, 2016; Behrendt et al.,

2012). Through the university's provision of computers and printing facilities, students can participate in university without the added financial stress of accessing the required tools for study.

In regard to other resources and their effect on student engagement, the responses varied, as there were different resources available at each campus. The different IEU layouts and resources on offer influence student engagement with each unit. Students identified increased access when the unit was fit for their purpose. The Gold Coast campus unit was purpose built, and students spoke highly of the layout and its benefit for their productivity, studies, and connection to each other. Students further identified that the layout and use of the centre itself had a positive impact on their ability to study: it enabled them to speak to other students and engage with university curriculum in more depth. When students attend class, they are primarily with students studying the same program; however, within the IEU, students gain insight from others in a range of study areas. This allowed students to learn from and inspire each other to study. Creation of a space where students can unpack curriculum and their learning gives them an opportunity to theorise knowledge from an Indigenous Standpoint (Nakata, 2006).

Chapter 4 identified that over 93% of survey participants agreed that having a dedicated space for First Peoples students was important to them. In addition to frequently using the space themselves, students further identified that when encouraging other First Peoples students to connect with the IEU, they would highlight how helpful accessing the space was to them and how it enhanced their studies. First Peoples students can find it more challenging than non-Indigenous students to become attached to a place (Carter et al., 2018); however, the findings indicate that there is place-attachment with the IEU rather than within the university itself and this attachment positively impacts student outcomes.

5.3.2 *Programs and Financial Resources*

Tutoring has traditionally been provided by IEUs as their primary form of academic assistance and literature shows that First Peoples students identify tutoring as a critical factor in their academic success (Behrendt et al., 2012; Nakata et al., 2018). The uptake of tutoring within the broader First Peoples cohort has been similar to that of IEU engagement, with 30% of students receiving tutoring. Within this study, students overwhelmingly agreed that tutoring was valuable to their studies and their success at university. “The tutoring that they provide as well through ATSITAP or ITAS as it used to be called. That's been really supportive” (Participant 3). As indicated in Chapter 4, 68.3% of students in this study had either previously received or were currently receiving tutoring. It could be suggested that as the percentage of students accessing tutoring within this study is much higher than the percentage university wide, then those students who engage with the IEU are more likely to receive tutoring than those who do not, so increased uptake of tutoring could be achieved by increasing IEU engagement. For some students, receiving tutoring was the only way that they engaged with the IEU, and it could further be suggested that promotion of the tutoring program could increase student engagement with the IEU.

Programs that have been facilitated by the IEU are another resource that contributes to student achievement and outcomes. Section 5.2 indicated that participation in the Kungullanji Program and participation in the Hands Up! Tertiary Preparation Program had enhanced students' sense of connection and belongingness. These programs have been developed and facilitated by the IEU and in turn promoted to students. Students identified that these programs had encouraged them to continue engagement with the IEU once the program had been completed. Both of these programs were designed as a result of unmet student need and they operate within the Cultural Interface (Nakata, 2002; 2007a). This provided a unique student experience that provided a culturally safe space to explore elements of Western

education in greater depth. Programs like these also provided an opportunity to connect with faculties and services within the university, further working towards a university-wide approach to student support and engagement.

The final resource discussed is access to discrete financial support that enhanced the students' experiences and contributed to their success. As noted in Chapter 2, limited finances are a barrier to First Peoples' participation and success within higher education; however, tertiary education is crucial to improve the socioeconomic status of communities. While the IEU does not provide scholarships, it has provided financial assistance to meet students' specific needs. In some cases, this has taken the form of emergency bursaries; in others, financial assistance to attend conferences and study tours. The majority of participants had not accessed any financial support from the IEU; however, the survey identified that students from different campuses requested financial support for different reasons. This may be attributed to the variation between the campuses, not only in location but in the variety of programs offered at each campus.

For those students at Logan campus who had received a bursary, 50% cited personal reasons. Logan campus has a higher proportion than any other campus of students who are mature aged females. First Peoples students at Logan campus primarily study nursing, midwifery, and social work (Griffith University, 2020d). These programs all require students to attend significant placements, which inhibit students from undertaking part-time work. In addition to this, these students may also be caring for children or other family members. Fredericks (2009a) indicated that universities display a lack or disregard toward First Peoples' worldviews within the curriculum. University undergraduate curricula are designed for students who are school leavers, assuming that students are supported by their families while undertaking the mandatory components of their studies. For First Peoples students, this is often not the case, and it is therefore easy to see why students from this campus were more

reliant on personal financial support. Perhaps if there was greater flexibility within the study program structure, students may not require financial support when attending placement.

At the Gold Coast campus, 60% of students who had requested financial assistance did so to attend a conference. The opportunity to attend a conference further enriched the students' experience and provided additional motivation to complete their degree, as noted, "being able to be attend a conference, sponsored by GUMURRII has given me the drive to continue on with my education, even though I am facing some pretty tough challenges at the moment" (Survey Response). Regardless of the reason for financial assistance, findings indicate that it had a positive impact on the students' experience. The opportunity to enhance the student experience by attending conferences or study tours seems to rely on the financial assistance provided by the IEU. As previous research (Asmar, Page, & Radloff, 2015; Behrendt et al., 2012) has indicated, support for First Peoples students should be engaging and university wide; it could be beneficial for faculties and the broader university to take a greater financial interest in creating opportunities for First Peoples students to enrich their experience in this way.

It is without doubt that the resources available from IEUs have contributed to the achievements of students who have accessed them. This section has uncovered that resources need to be effectively promoted, and specific to student needs. The resources provided clearly assist students in overcoming the barriers that were identified in Section 2.5 by preparing students to study, facilitating student connection and cultural safety, providing support, and easing financial burdens (Barney, 2016; Behrendt et al., 2012; Nakata et al., 2004; Page et al., 2017). It has further been identified that through using the resources, relationships have been built: between students, between students and staff, and between students and the university. By IEUs continuing to promote opportunities, connect with faculties, and provide targeted

financial assistance, the financial burden is eased for students, leading to a greater chance of student success and completion.

5.4 First Peoples' Voice in Success at University

Previous sections have discussed why and how First Peoples students are connecting with the IEU and using the available resources. GUMURRII has created a safe space where students become active agents in their learning journey. Taking a look at the student experience from their perspective, it is clear that First Peoples students look to the IEU for much more than support. As discussed in Chapter 2, the university landscape has significantly changed. The findings from this study further indicate that First Peoples students' needs and expectations of university have also evolved; therefore, reevaluation of service delivery is required to respond to student demand. By understanding factors which have contributed to students' success and incorporating suggestions from First Peoples students, the IEU will be able to adapt to meet the needs of more students and thus increase student engagement.

The previous discussions, in Sections 5.2 and 5.3, have highlighted how GUMURRII has become students' "home away from home", a place of cultural safety and acceptance, and has provided resources which have been critical to their success at university. Students identified many factors that have influenced their continued engagement with GUMURRII throughout their university journey; however, findings indicate that engagement and access to programs and opportunities varied, depending on the students' progress. Many students spoke about opportunities and programs facilitated by the IEU that enhanced their studies. This challenges the historical purpose of IEUs, which focussed on assisting students to overcome barriers to university study by providing access, increasing participation, and providing academic support (Andersen et al., 2008; Nakata et al., 2004). Students agreed that the IEU contributes to their success; their suggestions for enhancing engagement are discussed in

Section 5.4.1 and their suggestions surrounding how the IEU could meet the needs of a greater number of First Peoples students are discussed in Section 5.4.2.

5.4.1 *Enhancing Engagement*

In Chapter 4, students identified unique ways in which the IEU had assisted them individually. Although individual responses varied, it is clear that by engaging with GUMURRII, students have had more success within their academic studies or have enhanced their student experience. Students also recognised the importance of engaging with the IEU and made suggestions about how more students could be attracted to engage, or how the IEU could further contribute to their success at university. Findings indicated that among students, there was a lack of knowledge or understanding of what the IEU does, or how it can enhance First Peoples' experiences and success at university. Students recognised the need for increased presence of the IEU within the university and increased opportunities for the IEU to build relationships with other students, university staff, and the broader community. Literature has identified that while IEUs are situated within most Australian universities, there is a high variability among institutions regarding the service delivery (Oliver et al., 2016). Students may not have accessed the IEU at their university because they believe they do not need traditional support; however, as this research has found, there are many ways in which engaging with the IEU has contributed to student success. It has been identified that, to reach parity and improve First Peoples students' outcomes in higher education, increased student engagement with targeted support is pivotal (Asmar et al., 2011). This research has further highlighted strategies which could be used to increase continued engagement with the IEU. These strategies include: awareness and engaging students more effectively prior to commencement or orientation; facilitating stronger connections between students and internal and external stakeholders; broader university awareness of GUMURRII and inclusion of First

Peoples perspectives throughout the university; and targeted support for postgraduate and online students.

5.4.2 *Creating Opportunities*

As mentioned, students developed a sense of belonging through their engagement with the IEU; therefore, students suggested promoting engagement with the IEU and facilitating opportunities for students to build relationships. Students suggested continuing the Hands Up! Tertiary Preparation Program as this facilitated the sense of belonging and connection: “HandsUp! allowed me to connect with students who are on a similar journey, many whom I would consider myself to be still close to” (Survey Response). The value of peer connection was highlighted throughout the findings and students suggested that the Hands Up! program, and other mentoring programs had provided this connection. Almost 60% of students had already recommended to other students to access the IEU and students referred to the positive response when speaking with other First Peoples students about the IEU. Continuing and expanding the Hands Up! Tertiary Preparation Program and having a strong presence at orientation was suggested as a way to promote the IEU to commencing students and to connect students with broader university services.

This study has indicated that there is a lack of understanding and awareness of the IEU in the broader university community. Students also identified this and suggested that a stronger presence is needed: “More promotion of what GUMURRII does and what services they offer, how they can help you” (Survey Response). Students suggested that promotion could be through posters, speaking at orientation, or hosting networking events. Students felt the university needed to be more accountable for its First Peoples students and for First Peoples’ perspectives and culture. Participant 8 suggested that there needed to be more celebration of other cultural dates beyond NAIDOC week and that an Acknowledgement of Country should be performed in each lecture to create a further sense of acceptance and

respect in the broader university. These suggestions would also align with the university's current strategic plan (Griffith University, 2019).

The last notable suggestion was that GUMURRII needs to broaden its services to meet student needs. The online students who participated in this study commonly voiced that they did not feel engaged with the IEU and for some this was because they were unaware that they could access services, support, or opportunities as they were not on campus. This is another indicator that, as discussed in Chapter 2, university education has changed; however, IEU practices and support have not evolved accordingly. Additionally, HDR candidates and postgraduate students often commented that while they valued their engagement as an undergraduate student, the IEU was no longer providing what they required as a postgraduate: "So I think an area of improvement would potentially be HDR support" (Participant 3). IEUs have traditionally been focused on undergraduate enrolment and student support as this was a reason for their development (Bin-Sallik, 2003; Nakata et al., 2017; Trudgett, 2010). Students highlighted that they need more from the IEU to keep them engaged. It was further suggested that more could be offered to support students' transition through their programs or even beyond graduation. Students wanted assistance in mapping their programs and suggested a stronger relationship with programs directors and program support was required. It was suggested that more opportunities to network with staff in their study areas could assist bridge this gap and that more promotion of existing opportunities was required.

In summary, this research has identified that engagement with IEUs positively impacted upon students' success at university. It was identified that the students who engaged utilised the available support and services. However, student needs have evolved significantly since IEUs were established, and not all current services are useful to all students. In order to increase engagement with the IEU, it was suggested that services should adapt to meet the

needs of current students and that there must be a greater understanding and awareness of the role and function of the IEU within the university. By viewing these findings through a phenomenological lens, recommendations to increase student engagement can be suggested.

Chapter 6: Recommendations

This chapter presents recommendations emerging from the discussion of research findings and suggests future directions for research. First Peoples students' experiences, viewpoints, and perspectives of engagement with GUMURRII were explored through a phenomenological lens. By unpacking the student voice through the Cultural Interface and Indigenous Standpoint Theory, there is potential to enrich greater numbers of First Peoples students' experiences, to enhance overarching university practices and services, and ultimately to improve First Peoples students' success and outcomes within higher education in Australia.

This research has identified factors which influence First Peoples students' decisions to access and engage with GUMURRII. By gaining insight into students' experiences within the Cultural Interface, this study has uncovered what First Peoples students' value in their engagement with the IEU. Better appreciation of, and responsibility for, these factors by departments within the university can improve First Peoples student outcomes by (a) encouraging student engagement with the IEU, and (b) taking responsibility for raising awareness within their own departments to improve cultural safety across the broader university. First Peoples students identified that their decision to access and engage with the IEU was in response to their perceived needs, their perception of how GUMURRII could meet those needs, and opportunities arising throughout their academic journey that encouraged engagement with the IEU. Continued engagement occurred due to the sense of belonging that was created. From an Indigenous Standpoint (Nakata, 2007b), students made sense of their university journey and verbalised and shared knowledge in the space with people who recognised and responded with their own Indigenous viewpoint. Having a place to discuss teachings in a safe way has an ongoing benefit to the students' success and experience at university.

IEUs were established to assist First Peoples students to overcome barriers to tertiary education, such as access, preparedness and finances, and these units have traditionally focused on student support, such as tutoring, from an assumption that First Peoples' students struggle academically or are unprepared for university. The university landscape has shifted: for example, the first initiative in Griffith's Strategic Plan 2020-2025 includes "building on Indigenous student and staff strengths" (p. 2) as a value that underpins the strategy. No longer can First Peoples' participation in higher education be viewed within a deficit context, and it is crucial that IEUs also transform practices to meet the evolving needs of students who have varying academic abilities and research/HDR aspirations to contribute to their success. The findings of this research also support this, and also indicate that student engagement with the IEU increases when First Peoples students are provided with a range of services and opportunities in addition to support. Recommendations therefore include (a) shifting the focus of the IEU from generic academic support only to targeted skill development and research-focused programs and opportunities that not only contribute to undergraduate student retention and progression but also widen the future postgraduate opportunities and success of students; (b) further developing and promoting existing strengths, internal capabilities, skill sets, and positions supported within the IEU to support expanded services; and (c) greater consultation, collaboration, and responsibility to be undertaken by broader university groups, schools, and departments to leverage existing skill sets and research capabilities to support GUMURRII's expanded service offerings to First Peoples students.

6.1 From Support to Targeted Programs and Opportunities

The first recommendation is to develop programs that develop particular skill sets and capacities, such as research skills, to support future postgraduate and HDR pathways, recognising that students who use IEUs are not just "struggling academically". Previous literature has suggested that support offered by the IEU needs to complement a university-

wide approach to student support delivery (Berendt et al., 2012; Nakata et al., 2017); this research, however, indicates that support is not the only way in which IEUs contribute to retention, progression, and success of First Peoples students. Findings indicated that there are many different needs of First Peoples students, such as those who require additional nurturing to access and be successful in postgraduate studies; enhancing the experience of postgraduate students in those programs, propelling high-achieving or accomplished students to even greater successes; and supporting those who are looking for opportunities to progress their careers or give back to the community.

6.1.1 Targeted Programs

At Griffith, practices already focus upon engagement with commencing students and those who ask for, or are identified as, requiring academic support or assistance (Griffith University, 2019b). Of Griffith's First Peoples commencing students, 17% engaged with tertiary preparation and orientation programs, and tutoring is utilised by 23-30% of students each study period (Griffith University, 2019b). Furthermore, within the literature, studies into commencing student engagement and support strategies are common (Bandias et al., 2014; Nakata et al., 2018; Nakata et al., 2017; Oliver et al., 2016). In this study, students who participated in interviews/focus groups discussed many other ways they engage with GUMURRII; however, these were not heavily promoted by the IEU or raised by the majority of students in the survey. Programs such as undergraduate research, overseas study tours and exchange, networking for engagement with community or career development, conference attendance, mentoring, and work experience were all highlighted as ways in which participants engaged with the IEU. There is a perception that students engage with the IEU for support or when they require assistance and this view needs to evolve.

The IEU could first identify what programs or supports are already available within the wider university for students who are first year, second or third year, high achieving, or

bridging the gap to employment. Additionally, this could include investigating those external to the university. Strategies for enhancing access to any such programs or supports for First Peoples students should be developed or, alternately, a similar opportunity should be presented to First Peoples students with any access barriers such as inflexible GPA cut offs removed, for example the Kungullanji Program.

Upon collating any additional supports or opportunities for students, a calendar or engagement strategy could be developed to encourage participation from the students. Targeted promotion or demystifying how GUMURRII can benefit students at different points in their studies will encourage more students to access the IEU. By providing stronger links or facilitating pathways to existing programs, student engagement could also increase.

6.1.2 *Opportunities for Success*

Increasing awareness of how GUMURRII can contribute to the success of students who do not need intensive academic or pastoral support would benefit a range of students who are high achieving or postgraduate. This would further increase student engagement with the IEU and contribute to student success and outcomes. This is consistent with previous findings (Behrendt et al., 2012; Trudgett, 2010) in that postgraduate students felt that the support provided by the IEU did not meet their needs. By shifting the focus from a support model to include opportunities and strategies to enhance the experience of postgraduate students, student engagement with this cohort may be increased.

IEUs already nurture cultural safety particularly well, which was affirmed by this research. The community and safe space were so important to students and many benefited from the conversations they had with other First Peoples students while in the space. This was not something that is provided by staff within the IEU, but by the student cohort themselves. The space allows students to theorise knowledge from their own point of view as is facilitated through the Cultural Interface. It was also identified that students wanted an

opportunity to mentor or connect with other students. This research showed that students appreciate learning from and mentoring each other, growing First Peoples knowledges and sharing from their standpoint. Moreton-Robinson (2013) stated, “we search for and identify shared knowledge, values, norms and behaviour in order to stake a claim to the ‘validity’ of our findings” (p. 334). Students are looking to connect with culture and navigate the higher education space with recognition and support of their First Peoples’ identity and knowledges. Functioning as a CoP, the IEU allows students to share their practice as a First Peoples scholar, and understand it better through this sharing of practice, knowledge and experience (Wenger, 2011).

Therefore, it is suggested to include existing First Peoples students as mentors, and to recruit more First Peoples mentors in any such program or opportunity. The student voice could be captured further by implementing student representatives or student groups to provide feedback to IEU staff. This would allow the IEU to provide additional support and encouragement to student-led initiatives that could be influential in increasing student engagement with the IEU.

The recommendations above – to shift towards targeted programs and opportunities – will align closer to meeting the needs of contemporary First Peoples students and position GUMURRII as the heart of Griffith’s First Peoples CoP, rather than as merely a support centre.

6.2 Expanding Current Strengths

The students identified many ways in which GUMURRII assisted with their studies, including academic support, resources, and cultural safety. While these may be seen as traditional support mechanisms of IEUs, this research has highlighted the importance of looking at these in different ways to ensure they meet the needs of the contemporary First Peoples cohort. The following section explores this perspective.

6.2.1 *Tutoring as a Tool for Success*

Within the literature, supplementary tutoring is viewed as a vital academic support measure to assist in addressing gaps in students' academic knowledge (Behrendt et al., 2012; Kinnane et al., 2014; Nakata et al., 2018). ATSITAP was the most discussed service that was offered by GUMURRII; however, it is only used by approximately 30% of students, and often students do not use tutoring for their entire time at university. Past studies have suggested that tutoring programs have been inflexible and that some students have been restricted from receiving tutoring (Whatman et al., 2008; Wilks et al., 2017). This could indicate that the tutoring program in its current form is not meeting the needs of all students. There is clearly lack of awareness of the program or perhaps students feel they do not need additional help. Tutoring has been framed to address an academic deficit rather than as a tool to increase academic performance, skills, and confidence (Wilks et al., 2017). It may be worth further review of ATSITAP to see how it can meet the needs of additional students to advance their academic performance. The implementation of the Indigenous Student Success Program in 2017 allows for a nuanced approach (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017). ATSITAP could be expanded to assist greater numbers of postgraduate students, assist final year students meet GPA requirements for postgraduate study or graduate positions, and be adapted virtually to meet the needs of online students. Furthermore, there are many students who achieve highly and who were not themselves receiving tutoring. It may be beneficial to actively recruit these students as tutors or revise the tutor recruitment strategy. Similar to mentor recruitment discussed in Section 6.1.2, high-achieving students who may not access the unit for assistance themselves, would be able to develop a relationship with other students and staff and possibly access further opportunities through the IEU.

6.2.2 *Up-to-Date and Customised Resources*

This research has indicated that many students valued the resources that were offered by GUMURRII. Students used the space and its inclusions and most students visited GUMURRII frequently, with 54.96% of participants indicating that they visited the IEU most of the time or every time they attended campus. It was further discussed that the spaces on each campus varied and that some were not fit for purpose or required updating. As discussed in Section 5.2, connection and belonging were factors in student engagement with GUMURRII. Relationships were developed which enhanced the student experience and this was facilitated by students who shared the same physical space on campus. Students became attached to the place and identified their success with accessing the space. Furthermore, within universities, interconnectedness can only occur where large numbers of First Peoples can live, learn, and work together, such as within IEUs. As Moreton-Robinson (2013) suggested, interconnectedness is the foundation of Indigenous sovereignty: the connection to our respective countries, human ancestors, creative beings, and all living things which inform our standpoint. Simply by existing and providing a space for students and encouraging them to gather, the IEU is contributing to student success. It is therefore suggested that the spaces need to be purpose built for students to encourage greater access and opportunity for connection. It is further recommended that in order to meet the needs of students who are studying remotely, a virtual environment is created to facilitate a similar student experience.

Online students within this study appeared to have much less awareness of, or interaction with, the IEU. First Peoples students can be just as successful as their non-Indigenous peers if appropriate measures are in place (Anderson et al., 2008). It is therefore recommended that services be reviewed and expanded to ensure they also meet the needs of students. It is therefore important to have a thorough understanding of student needs and to adapt services and resources as required.

6.2.3 *Enhanced Promotion and Engagement Strategy*

There was an overwhelming sense of lack of awareness of certain programs and opportunities available through GUMURRII from students within the study. This is understandable, given the perception that the role of the IEU is to assist students who are struggling or who may not be prepared for university. Barney (2016) reported that “some Indigenous undergraduate students noted that they did not initially know the unit existed or felt it was only for students who need assistance” (p. 8). While assistance and support for students who require it should continue, there is clearly a need for a greater understanding and promotion of ways in which students can enhance their studies through engaging with GUMURRII. As findings indicate, different campus cohorts accessed financial assistance for varying reasons, such as conference attendance funding and emergency financial assistance. It may be that some students are unaware of what financial assistance could be accessed. It is therefore recommended that types of financial assistance and application processes be streamlined and promoted to students. Furthermore, if a particular type of financial assistance is not within the remit of the IEU, then a clear referral process or collaboration with other services may be recommended to meet this need.

This research has indicated that a number of participants did not know that GUMURRII existed, or what services they could access through the unit. Participants commented that there was a lack of presence and awareness of the IEU at orientation and throughout the university itself. Students suggested posters around campus or participation in school orientation programs to advise commencing students of what could be accessed. Findings further indicated that students who studied online appeared to have much less awareness of, or interaction with, the IEU than students enrolled on campus. It is therefore recommended that services be reviewed and expanded to ensure they are also fit for purpose for online students. Currently, all students are often contacted by email; promotion strategies

need to meet varying student needs, so a more active approach is required such as telephone contact and advertising through posters, email, and faculty visits. It is therefore important to have a thorough understanding of student needs and to adapt services, resources, and promotion as required.

6.3 Collaboration with the Wider University Community

In order to engage with greater numbers of First Peoples students, GUMURRII needs to take an active approach in strengthening relationships and creating a strong presence within the broader university community. This can be done by ensuring First Peoples success is the responsibility of all, not just the IEU.

6.3.1 *A Wider Approach to Success*

Taking a university-wide approach to supporting First Peoples was Recommendation 10 of the Behrendt Review. The IEU continues to play an important role in the success of First Peoples within higher education and should not be replaced; however, placing the primary responsibility on the faculties and mainstream services, backed up by IEUs, will improve participation, retention and success (Uink et al., 2019). Such an approach would allow students to have a sense of safety within the broader institution and would also encourage students to seek out the IEU and be a part of the community. Griffith University (2019) is committed to inclusivity and diversity. It recognises “the importance of respecting Indigenous knowledge, culture and talent” (p. 4); however, there may be a lack of understanding or purpose in practice, given students’ experiences of being referred back to the IEU instead of being assisted by the faculty. It is therefore suggested that through collaboration, GUMURRII strengthen relationships and partnerships with university-wide services and faculties. Through this, the space in which First Peoples students are free to

share their knowledges, live, and learn will be expanded, cementing students' sense of belonging and contributing to their success.

6.3.2 *Relationships Create Opportunities*

Building and strengthening relationships between GUMURRII and faculties could reveal other opportunities for collaboration. Research indicates that when students are engaged in educationally effective practices, including orientation, they are more likely to have successful outcomes in higher education (Kuh et al., 2008). This study uncovered that students desired an increased First Peoples presence in orientation activities. Orientation programs allow commencing students to familiarise themselves with university processes, services, and key information relevant to their studies, in addition to social activities and events. As Indigenous knowledges can only be possessed by First Peoples (Nakata, 2007b), the partnership between GUMURRII and faculty orientations is crucial to student success. In addition to faculty relationships, by linking with other parts of the university, such a student mentoring can enhance the student experience. Orientation mentor training could include awareness of the IEU or, as suggested above, appointing First Peoples students as mentors for the university orientation programs would be beneficial. In addition to mentor training, each school or group hosts their own orientation session and this could present an opportunity for IEU staff or First Peoples students to speak to commencing students. This would be valuable as all staff and students present would have an opportunity to learn about the IEU and more First Peoples students may seek out the unit from this presentation.

Students within this study desired greater networking opportunities and assistance with careers and pathway mapping. This could be another opportunity for collaboration with faculties and their industry partners. Bringing students together through networking would further assist positioning the IEU as a CoP rather than as a support centre, and students will, as Moreton-Robinson (2013) suggests, build and share their knowledges and experiences

from their own Indigenous standpoints. As students clearly value the connection and sense of belonging that engaging with the IEU creates, establishing further opportunities for networking and bringing students together will enhance their sense of purpose and belonging, ultimately increasing engagement and student success.

6.4 Future Research

This case study has examined First Peoples students' engagement with GUMURRII from the students' perspective. Discrete recommendations to increase student engagement, and ultimately retention, progression, and success, have emerged from this study and were detailed in Chapter 6. Future research could explore the effectiveness of (a) shifting from support to targeted programs and opportunities; (b) expanding current strengths of the IEU such as tutoring, resources, and promotion or awareness; and (c) collaboration with the wider university community on First Peoples students' retention, progression and success and engagement with GUMURRII. Examining the effectiveness of strengthened collaboration and relationships through a university-wide approach to First Peoples students' success would be an ideal starting point. This not only aligns with the findings of this study, but implementation of this approach is a recommendation of the Behrendt Report and there is a dearth of literature exploring the value IEUs can bring across the university in areas such as teaching, curriculum, research and governance (Uink et al., 2019).

Expanding the current case study to capture the perspectives of GUMURRII staff could provide additional insight into the student experience and be included in the analysis. All student-facing staff in GUMURRII are First Peoples (Griffith University, 2019b), who each day in their role assist students to bridge the gap that is the Cultural Interface. Their standpoints are shaped by their experience as First Peoples and their knowledge could further be used to enhance the student experience. This study could further be expanded to delve

deeper into postgraduate student support, success and engagement as this study and the broader literature (Behrendt et al., 2012; Trudgett, 2010; Trudgett et al., 2017) has found current forms of support provided by IEUs does not meet the needs of postgraduate students. Deeper studies into the career progression of First Peoples students from undergraduate to postgraduate to academia would also be a welcome addition to the field.

Finally, the study was conducted at a site that has one of the largest enrolments of First Peoples students in Australia. It could therefore be beneficial to extend this study to other higher education institutions such as the Group of Eight (Go8) who have lower numbers of enrolments and higher completions (Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011). Alternately, replicating this study in universities with similar retention, progression and success rates to Griffith but smaller numbers overall could reveal strengths of non-Go8 institutions. This could inform the suitability of recommendations for institutions with various numbers of First Peoples students or could highlight additional factors influencing engagement and student outcomes.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This study sought to identify the factors which influence First Peoples students' decisions to access and engage with GUMURRII SSU, the IEU at Griffith University. Through gaining a deeper understanding of why students initially access and engage with the IEU and then continue to do so, this study has provided explicit information that could improve First Peoples' access, participation, retention, and success in working towards parity and closing the educational gap. The findings of this study are relevant not only to GUMURRII staff but could further broadly inform university-wide support and the work of IEU staff across Australia.

By utilising an Indigenist research design, this case study sought and enabled interpretation of the lived experiences of First Peoples students to better understand reasons for engagement with IEUs and to explore the impacts upon their ongoing participation and outcomes in higher education. First Peoples students at Griffith University participated in this study by completing an online survey, and 10 of these students participated in interviews or focus groups. The findings that emerged as factors in student engagement with GUMURRII were discussed in this study as Connection and Belonging, Maximising the Resource Potential, and First Peoples' Voice in Student Success. Students who engaged with GUMURRII acknowledged how their tertiary experience had been enriched. The IEU is a space where First Peoples students can access support and opportunities which enhance their individual experience of university, therefore becoming an enabling Cultural Interface for First Peoples students.

This study has identified that students engage with IEUs for reasons beyond traditional tertiary support. No longer can IEUs meet the needs of students from a deficit model of support such as entry programs and tutoring for failing or at-risk students. While these are still important in First Peoples students' success and should be maintained, students

require so much more. IEUs must take a CoP approach and become a place where First Peoples students can strive for excellence in the higher education space. IEUs are crucial in providing a space where First Peoples perspectives can be shared and celebrated, thereby positively contributing to the student experience and success. To increase student engagement, findings of this study reveal three key recommendations. GUMURRII should firstly shift its focus from support to providing greater targeted programs and opportunities that are tailored to diverse student needs, such as including postgraduate and high-achieving students and contributing to all students' success. Secondly, it should expand current strengths, such as positioning its tutoring program as a tool for success rather than as a program that is only available to struggling students, ensuring that all students are aware of opportunities and services available through the IEU by a revitalised promotion strategy. Finally, it should collaborate with the wider university to create a stronger presence and understanding of the IEU's purpose within the university community and seek out opportunities for student success and collaboration. In addition to these recommendations, possible future directions for research have been identified which will build upon the findings and recommendations highlighted in this study.

Improving First Peoples success in higher education will positively impact upon social and economic outcomes in Australia and is of great benefit to all. Through listening to the student voice and perspectives, this research has determined the factors which influence students' decisions to access and engage with GUMURRII. By employing recommendations from this study and furthering student engagement, the IEU and the broader university will provide the best opportunity for First Peoples students' success.

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Appendices

Appendix A

First Peoples Student Engagement Survey Questions

Section A: Demographic information

Can you please tell us a little about yourself?

A1. What is your age range?

- 18-22
- 23-29
- 30-40
- 50+

A2. Please select your gender

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say
- Other

A3. Are you?

- Aboriginal
- Torres Strait Islander
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

A4. Do you come from?

Where were you living before you started university, or where is your family from?

- South East Qld (eg. Gold Coast, Brisbane area)
- Rural
- Remote
- Interstate
- Other

A5. Is English your first language?

- Yes
- No

- A6. Are you the first in your immediate family to study at university?

- Yes (eg. no one has been to uni before)
- No (eg. Mum, Dad or siblings have been to uni)
- I'm not sure

A7. When you applied to come to university, did you complete a Direct Entry Application with GUMURRII Student Success Unit?

It does not matter if you received your offer through QTAC/UAC or direct from admissions. Please choose "yes" if you completed a direct entry application.

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

A8. Which Griffith University campus do you study at?

- Gold Coast
- Logan
- Mount Gravatt
- Nathan
- Southbank
- Online

A9. Are you studying an undergraduate (e.g. Bachelor degree) or postgraduate (e.g. Graduate Diploma, Masters) program?

- Undergraduate
- Postgraduate

A10. Do you attend uni as a full-time (e.g. 3 or more courses each trimester) or part-time (2 or less courses each trimester) student?

- Full-time
- Part-time

A11. Has your attendance mode changed since you started studying, if so can you share why?

- No
- Yes full-time to part-time
- Yes part-time to full-time

How many credit points have you completed in your current degree?

- 0-80
- 90-160
- 170-240

- 240+
- I'm not sure
- I have recently completed my degree or graduated

A13. Which Academic Group do you belong to?

- GBS (Griffith Business School - eg. Business, Commerce, Government)
- AEL (Arts, Education & Law - eg. Design, Social Science, Communication, Criminology,
- Music)
- Sciences (eg. Engineering, IT, Environment, Architecture)
- Health (eg. Biomedical Science, Social Work, Psychology, Nursing)

Section B: GUMURRII Contact

B1. Have you ever visited the GUMURRII SSU on your campus or spoken with a GUMURRII staff member?

If you are an online student and have contacted GUMURRII by email or telephone, please choose "yes".

- Yes
- No but I plan to in the future
- No and I do not plan to

Section C: GUMURRII Contact

These questions relate to your contact with GUMURRII Student Success Unit.

C1. What motivated/prompted you to make contact with GUMURRII the first time?

- I needed Information on degrees, or applying for Griffith
- GUMURRII Staff Visited my school
- I visited the GUMURRII stall at Griffith Open Day
- I attended GUMURRII Open Night
- I needed help with enrolment
- I was referred by another Griffith Staff member
- I was referred by another GUMURRII Student
- I wanted to apply for Tutoring
- I read the GUMURRII weekly enews
- GUMURRII Staff contacted me directly

- Other

C2. How often do you visit GUMURRII SSU, and which one?

- Daily (or every time I come to campus)
- Most days (couple of times each week, or most times when I come to campus)
- About once a week
- About once a month
- About once a trimester
- I have never been into a GUMURRII Unit
- I have never been into a GUMURRII Unit as I am an online student

C3. How far into your studies at Griffith were you when you first came into GUMURRII?

If you are an online student, when did you first have contact with GUMURRII?

- It was during Orientation week or before I enrolled
- It was during my first trimester
- It was during my first year
- It was during my second year
- It was during my third or fourth year

Section D: Use of facilities and resources

The following questions relate to your use of GUMURRII services and resources. Think about what you use or access when you come into GUMURRII.

D1. How often do you use each of the following resources when you come into GUMURRII?

No

Always Usually Sometimes Rarely Never answer

The computers (including for just printing)?

The kitchen in GUMURRII SSU?

The meeting/conference rooms?

The study desks?

If you are an online student only, please proceed to the next question.

D2. GUMURRII provides tutoring to students through ATSITAP

(previously ITAS).

Can you please select the best option from the following:

- I have never used tutoring, but I know it is available
- I have used tutoring in the past, but I don't use it now
- I currently receive tutoring
- I have not received tutoring yet, but I plan to in the future
- I did not know tutoring was available

D3. Have you received financial assistance from GUMURRII? This does not relate to bookshop vouchers given at orientation.

- No
- Yes - personal financial reasons
- Yes - to attend a conference
- Yes - to attend an exchange
- Yes – to purchase course materials
- Other

Section E: Relationships

The following questions relate to your relationship with GUMURRII SSU Staff and other GUMURRII Students.

E1. Please select how strongly you agree or disagree with these statements regarding your relationship with GUMURRII staff.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I often speak to Learning Assistance Officers in GUMURRII (SSOs)?					
I feel comfortable speaking with SSOs					
I find GUMURRII staff approachable					
I have a strong relationship with one or more SSOs					

E2. What do you usually seek assistance from SSOs for?

- Personal issues

- Study issues
- Yarning / chat
- Other

E3. Think about your courses, how likely are you to sit with, or work with, another GUMURRII student in class (e.g. lectures, labs, tutorials etc.)?

- Highly unlikely
- Unlikely
- Likely
- Highly likely

E4. Do you work on assessment items with other GUMURRII students?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Usually
- Always

E5. Do you study for your exams with other GUMURRII students?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Usually
- Always

E6. Do you spend time outside uni socially with students you have met in GUMURRII?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Usually
- Always

E7. For the following questions, please select whether you agree or disagree with the statements.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I think that GUMURRII social events such as BBQs and trivia nights are important.					
I think that Cultural events such as NAIDOC, yarning circles, Walk and Talk are important.					
I think having a dedicated study space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is important.					
The support I have received from GUMURRII staff meets my needs.					
Support received from GUMURRII has had a positive impact on my studies.					
I find that other students in GUMURRII are approachable.					
GUMURRII facilities on the campus I visit most meet my needs.					

E8. Has GUMURRII support assisted your decision to stay at university?

Y/N Please comment below:

- Yes
- No

E9. Have or would you encourage other students to access GUMURRII? If so, what might you do or say? If no, why not?

- Yes, I have
- Yes, I would
- No, I wouldn't

Section F: Open Ended Responses

Please provide as much detail in response to the following questions.

F1. What is the best thing that GUMURRII has done to assist you with your studies?

F2. Is there anything that GUMURRII could improve on to assist you with your studies?

F3. How could GUMURRII encourage more students to access services?

Section G: Other Services

G1. Do you access any other support or services provided at Griffith University?

Please comment or describe service if you like.

- Student Services (including Disabilities, Welfare, Counselling, Chaplaincy or Medical Service)
- Student Guild
- First Peoples Health Unit
- Indigenous Research Unit
- Kungullanji
- GUPSA or GCAP
- Griffith Graduate Research School
- Honours College
- Sports College
- Mentoring
- Other
-

G2. Do you access any support or mentoring from any external organisations?

For example IAHA (Indigenous Allied Health Australia) or Career

Trackers? If so please comment.

End Message

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

If you are willing to be contacted to participate further in an interview or small focus group we would like to hear from you! It will give you an opportunity to discuss your experience studying at university further. Please click the link below to enter your details.

If you would like to go into the draw to win one of three \$50 Coles Myer Gift Cards

please click the link below to enter your details.

Your email address cannot be associated with your survey responses.

[Click here to provide further information](#)

Appendix B

First Peoples Student Engagement Interview Questions

Example questions will be:

- Why did you decide to come to university?
- Can you tell me about your experience at university so far?
- Why did you decide to come in to GUMURRII?
- Can you describe a time or example of how GUMURRII has helped you with your studies?
- What do you think is the most important thing that GUMURRII does?
- What else could GUMURRII do to assist you, or other students more with their studies?
- What is it about the GUMURRII unit that keeps you coming back in?
- Why do you think it is important to have an Indigenous Education Unit like GUMURRII at universities?

Appendix C

First Peoples Student Engagement Online Survey Information and Consent

Welcome page

First Peoples' Engagement with University Indigenous Education Units.

This research aims to investigate what factors influence First Peoples students' decisions to access and engage with GUMURRII Student Success Unit, the Indigenous Education Unit at Griffith University. Griffith Ethics Approval reference number 2019/419.

Introduction

Welcome, thank you for your interest in this survey about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student's engagement with GUMURRII Student Success Unit. Before you proceed, please read the following information about your participation in the survey. Please be aware that after reading the information and proceeding to complete and submit the survey, your informed consent to participate has been given.

Why is the research being conducted?

The GUMURRII Student Success Unit (SSU) is a dedicated to assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with their studies at Griffith University. Not all students access or engage with GUMURRII SSU and this research aims to determine what factors influence student engagement with GUMURRII SSU. This research will also be used as part of the requirements for the Master of Education and Professional Studies Research program being undertaken by the student researcher.

What you will be asked to do

You will be asked to complete an online survey that asks you questions about your access and engagement with GUMURRII Student Success Unit. You will also be asked to provide some background demographic details. This information is not used to identify you in any way but rather it will tell us about the representation of the individuals participating in the study. You

will complete a mixture of multiple choice, likert scale questions (giving your opinion, such as “strongly agree – strongly disagree”) and open-ended responses (meaning you can type your answers into a text box and submit). The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. In return for completing the survey, you are eligible to enter a draw to win one of three \$50 Coles Group e-Gift Cards. Upon completion of data collection, the winners will be randomly selected by a person not involved with the research project, and will be contacted via email. You will also have the opportunity to volunteer to participate in a follow up interview or small focus group.

Participant selection

If you are an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander student, currently or recently enrolled at Griffith University you are welcome to participate.

The expected benefits of the research

We hope to better understand student engagement with GUMURRII SSU to improve access, retention and success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at University.

Risks to you

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. Your responses will remain anonymous. You can only be identified if you choose to do so in the comments section. If you wish to enter the prize draw, you will be asked to record your email address separately to the questionnaire responses. You will be directed to a different link where you can provide this information.

Your participation is voluntary

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw before submitting the survey and/or choose not to answer all questions without penalty. However, submitting the survey responses will be considered your informed consent to participate and because your response will be anonymous, it will not be possible to remove it from the

participant pool at a later date. Your decision to participate will in no way impact upon your current or future relationship with Griffith University or GUMURRII SSU.

Data Storage

The information you provide will be treated confidentially and all comments and responses are anonymous. Please do not put your name on the questionnaire. Participants' data will not be identifiable in any publication or reporting. As required by Griffith University, all research data (survey responses and analysis) will be stored in locked cabinets in a locked office at Griffith University or retained in a password protected electronic file at Griffith University for a minimum period of five years before being destroyed. The Chief Investigators will have control of access to the data, and only members of the research team will have access to the data.

Reporting of research findings

Results from this research will be reported in an academic thesis, and may also be disseminated via journal articles and/or conference presentations.

The ethical conduct of this research

Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. If potential participants have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research project, they should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on (07) 3735 4375 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au.

Consent to Participate

Completion and submission of the survey will be accepted as informed consent to participate. Participants will be given the opportunity separately to express consent to be contacted for interviews for the second part of the study.

Privacy Statement

The conduct of this research involves the collection of anonymous data. It will not be disclosed to third parties, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes.

Please refer to <http://www.griffith.edu.au> and search for Privacy Plan.

To view terms and conditions of the prize draw please [click here](#).

Appendix D

First Peoples Engagement Interview Information



First Peoples Students' Engagement with GUMURRII Student Success Unit

Investigating factors which influence student engagement with the Indigenous Education Unit

INFORMATION SHEET

(Please retain for your records)

Research Team

Principal Supervisor	Principal Supervisor	Student Researcher
Dr Susan Whatman	Dr Alison Sammel	Rebecca Cook
Education and Professional Studies	Education and Professional Studies	Education and Professional Studies
Arts, Education and Law	Arts, Education and Law	Arts, Education and Law
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Why the research is being conducted

The GUMURRII Student Success Unit (SSU) is a dedicated to assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with their studies at Griffith University. Not all students access or engage with GUMURRII SSU and this research aims to determine what factors influence student engagement with GUMURRII SSU. This research will also be used as part of the requirements for the Master of Education and Professional Studies Research program being undertaken by the student researcher.

What you will be asked to do

You may choose to participate in an interview or small focus group about your engagement with GUMURRII SSU and your experience at University. Morning/afternoon tea will be provided.

Participant selection

If you are an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander student currently studying, or recently studying, at Griffith University you are welcome to participate.

The expected benefits of the research

We hope to better understand student engagement with GUMURRII SSU to improve access, retention and success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at University.

Risks to you

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. Your responses will remain anonymous. You can only be identified if you choose to do so in the comments section.

Your participation is voluntary

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw before submitting the survey and/or choose not to answer all questions without penalty. However, submitting the survey responses will be considered your informed consent to participate and because your response will be anonymous, it will not be possible to remove it from the participant pool at a later date. Your decision to participate will in no way impact upon your current or future relationship with Griffith University or GUMURRII SSU.

Data Storage

The information you provide will be treated confidentially and all comments and responses are anonymous. Please do not put your name on the questionnaire. Participants' data will not be identifiable in any publication or reporting. As required by Griffith University, all research data will be stored in locked cabinets in a locked office at Griffith University or retained in a password protected electronic file at Griffith University for a minimum period of five years

before being destroyed. The Chief Investigators will have control of access to the data, and only members of the research team will have access to the data. Participants will be given the opportunity separately to express consent to be contacted for interviews for the second part of the study.

Reporting of research findings

Results from this research will be reported in an academic thesis, and may also be disseminated via journal articles and/or conference presentations.

The ethical conduct of this research

Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. If potential participants have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research project, they should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on (07) 3735 4375 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au.

Consent to Participate

Completion and submission of the attached consent form will be accepted as informed consent to participate.

Privacy Statement

The conduct of this research involves the collection of anonymous data. It will not be disclosed to third parties, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes. Please refer to <http://www.griffith.edu.au> and search for Privacy Plan.

Appendix E

First Peoples Students' Engagement with GUMURRII Student Success Unit Consent Form



Investigating factors which influence student engagement with the Indigenous Education Unit

CONSENT FORM

(Please return signed form to the Research Team)

Research Team

Principal Supervisor	Principal Supervisor	Student Researcher
Dr Susan Whatman	Dr Alison Sammel	Rebecca Cook
Education and Professional Studies	Education and Professional Studies	Education and Professional Studies
Arts, Education and Law	Arts, Education and Law	Arts, Education and Law
Griffith University	Griffith University	Griffith University
07 555 29240	07555 29792	07 555 28991
s.whatman@griffith.edu.au	a.sammel@griffith.edu.au	b.cook@griffith.edu.au

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the information package and in particular have noted that:

- I understand that my involvement in this research will include in participating in an audio recorded short interview/discussion about student support services and student use of support;
- I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction;
- I understand the risks involved;
- I understand that there will be no direct benefit to me from my participation in this research;

- I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary;
- I understand that if I have any additional questions I can contact the research team;
- I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty;
- I understand that I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on 3735 5585 (or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the project;
and
- I agree to participate in the project.

Name	
Signature	
Date	

Appendix F

Research timeline

[illegible]