



Eddie Koiki Mabo
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EDDIE KOIKI MABO

LECTURE SERIES

Re-thinking Indigenous Learning
Support (2016)

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James Cook University (JCU) celebrates the history-making Mabo decision with the long established **Eddie Koiki Mabo Lecture Series**, an annual public commemorative presentation by a prominent person who has made a significant contribution to contemporary Australian society.

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2016 Mabo Lecture

The legacy of an Island man now enshrined in approaches to formal education.

Prof N M Nakata, PVC Indigenous Education & Strategy, James Cook University.

Chancellor, Senior-Deputy Vice Chancellor, distinguished guests, and families - it is an honour to be invited here to deliver the 2016 Mabo Lecture, and I thank Florence for the warm welcome and pay my respect to the traditional owners of the land we are on today.

I came to study at James Cook University in 1988, long after Koiki Mabo worked here. He was by then already well known. It was in December of that year, that the findings of *Mabo and others v Qld (No 1)* were handed down. This judgement opened the way for Koiki Mabo, Dave Passi and James Rice to test the legal rights of Meriam people to their land on the islands of Mer, Duar, and Waier in *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)*. The result was the 1992 judgement we now know simply as *Mabo*.

Although my heritage is in the Central Islands of the Torres Strait, I have always had an admiration for the Murray Islanders. They seemed to wear their independence proudly but quietly. The history of the Meriam people exemplifies the Islander concept of 'coming up equal' and they approached their colonial relationships with the expectation of 'equal exchange'. Koiki Mabo has come to be the symbol of this because he succeeded in forcing an equal exchange. This was recognition by the highest court of Australian Law, of his pre-existing entitlement to his land under Malo's Law, which is the traditional Law. He and the other plaintiffs deserve their place in Australian history.

Mabo will be forever synonymous with Native Title but Koiki Mabo had another, less remarked on cause. That cause was education. For 12 years between 1973 and 1985, Koiki and Bonita Mabo and other parents, with the help of other supporters, established and ran the Black Community School here in Townsville. It was run in an old Catholic school building in South Townsville. It operated on uncertain and inadequate funding, and in the face of much hostility from the Queensland Education Department. The Department screamed separatism and 'reverse apartheid' (NFSA, 2008a). This was pretty laughable, given the historical separatist approach to the education of Indigenous people in this State. A Departmental spokesperson declared that:

People attempting to entice children away from a State Primary School and enrol them in an unauthorized school, not recognized by the State Education department were technically guilty of an offence and risked legal proceedings being instituted against them. (NFSA, 2008a)

Yes, slightly hypocritical of the Department given that, at the time, the school on Mer and all the other Torres Strait Island schools, excepting Thursday Island, were not run by the Education Department. They were still being run by the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement. Indeed, these schools only came under the Department in 1984. So at the time Koiki Mabo got the Black Community School going here, in the Torres Strait Islands children were still being taught in unlined un-insulated fibro buildings in an education agenda run by Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement not the Education Department.

Mabo and other founding parents set out the Black Community School's aims in their Manifesto, and I quote from it:

- (a) to give black children an alternative education more suited to their needs;
- (b) to involve the children's parents and community in these children's education;
- (c) to avoid the post grade four slump in learning by substituting a schooling which will give encouragement and hope, not indifference;
- (d) to substitute teachers who are understanding of Aborigine's difficulties and differences in outlook and aspiration;
- (e) to provide a satisfactory climate for the tuition of children who are academically oriented and motivated towards eventual tertiary education, and;
- (f) to be a focus around which the Black community can operate. (NFSA, 2008b)

The Manifesto was written 41 years ago. Much has changed in Indigenous education since the Black Community School closed in 1985 and since Koiki Mabo's death in 1992. But for all of that change, some things do not change. Despite improvements, many of the points in the Black Community School's manifesto still apply to a large degree. The post grade four slump is now the post Year 3 Benchmark gap which widens again in Year 6 and Year 9. We are still searching for more effective and appropriate education for different cultural and community contexts. We still talk of the need for more parental and community involvement and inclusion. We still talk of teachers needing to understand our children and their challenges and different needs, despite mandatory units in Indigenous education for pre-service teachers. And we do still talk of lifting children's educational achievement and aspirations for higher education while they are at school.

But yes, let's give change its due. There is a growing proportion of Indigenous students who are doing well, some very well, in schooling. But for the larger proportion, especially in far regional and remote parts of the country, the educational gaps still widen as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students move up into and through secondary school. In remote areas, the reasons for this are very complex and the solutions remain elusive.

And yet, success in education is an essential ingredient for a good future, perhaps second only to the security that comes from being loved and well-cared for in childhood. Without the benefits that come from meaningful educational achievement, from the confidence that comes with educational success, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders will continue to face difficult and disadvantaged futures.

If you read up about the Black Community School, you can see that Koiki Mabo was a thinker as much as he was an activist. In the way the curriculum was managed, the school engaged the fundamental tensions that still frame our approaches to Indigenous education today. This is the tension between an equal education, which is to say the same education that other Australians have access to, and an education that includes attention to the students' primary culture. Mabo was concerned about the transmission of cultural knowledge in the generations of children being raised away from their homelands and so the school included cultural knowledge in the curriculum.

Since 1989, this fundamental tension that the Black Community School engaged has been at the heart of the national Indigenous educational policy (NATSIEP, 1989). This is the quest to provide an education that enables Indigenous people to take advantage and prosper in the wider society and to be able to access forms of education that enable us also to preserve, maintain and continue to develop our own cultures, organisations, and communities as and where we see fit.

There is in the national policy, and in the principle of Indigenous self-determination that underpins it, a notion of choice - the Indigenous collective's right to choose the way forward according to the values, best interests, or needs of our community. The Policy principles are broad enough to allow local interpretations that accommodate local conditions and goals. They have been solid enough to remain meaningful over time.

But there are dangers when the arguments and advocacy derived from a broad-based policy lead to a common field of generalised explanations and solutions in Indigenous education. In interpreting policy principles into action, difficulties and differences arise in responding to the needs and conditions of diverse Indigenous contexts. Difficulties arise when solutions proposed for one context are applied uncritically to other situations, as if the conditions and goals are exactly the same. Difficulties also arise in dealing with the tensions between equal education and cultural maintenance and how to interpret that into educational practice.

Koiki and Bonita Mabo observed a problem in their children's reluctance to go to schools where racial taunts and teacher indifference reduced the children to tears and made them reluctant to attend school (NFSA, 2008c). They both acted to establish a better environment in which Aboriginal and Islander children could enjoy learning. Mabo did not dismiss the worth of an equal education - what Torres Strait Islanders long ago called 'proper' education. He wanted his children to get the benefits of education and acted because he did not see that as a possibility in the State schools at the time.

In working towards our own Indigenous goals in education, it is important that along the way we do not lose sight of the purpose of education in the wider society and why we want our children to fully participate and do as well as others in that society. Most importantly of all, we must back our belief in our children's capacity to engage and succeed in an education that will equip them to take full advantage of the opportunities open to all other children.

One of those opportunities is higher education.

It is less well known and I hope my source is right, that in the 1980s and before the Black Community School was closed, Koiki Mabo undertook a Diploma of Education at the former College of Advanced Education, over on the Western campus (NFSA, 2008d). By 1988, when I came to study at JCU, the College had been incorporated into JCU as the Education Faculty. Prior to study I had been working as a Commonwealth Education officer on Thursday Island. I felt I would be better positioned to do that job if I held the same body of knowledge as teachers, in addition to my local knowledge of the educational aspirations and challenges faced by the Torres Strait community. I thought my discussions with schools and the bureaucracy would be on a more equal footing, if I had this knowledge. This is the continuing Islander quest for equal exchange - for an equal footing in the negotiation of matters of shared interests. I wonder if Koiki Mabo had a similar motivation for study, with regard to the struggle to negotiate his educational priorities for the Black Community School.

In the Torres Strait, the notion of exchange is closely tied to the notion of 'coming up equal'. Koiki Mabo and I both grew up in the Torres Strait but in different generations and in different communities. I grew up with what we call Ailan Pasin or Island custom. Custom represented the way traditional ways had continually evolved through our interactions with others. The process involved domesticating outsider's knowledge and technologies into our own traditional systems for understanding our environment and our place in the world. As one Island man put it, we 'plussed' the new into the old (Sharp, 1993). Growing up with the traditional custom predisposed me, I think, to a view that the modern world out there had ideas and benefits that could be as useful or advantageous for us as they were for others. It secured me in my world but not with a rigid notion of culture. But always, it was quite observable that our ways were quite distinct from white ways. And so they remain.

But what was also passed down to me was the importance of trying to understand how the white people who brought their ways of doing things into our lives thought. How they thought and why they did the things they did. As one Islander said after the arrival of missionaries:

We can understand you captains, you come and trade with us, and then return to your own countries to sell what you get: but who are these missionaries? Have they done something in their country, that they dare not return. (McFarlane, 1888, p. 41)

Islander critical analysis circa 1880, don't you just love it.

Fisherman, missionaries and government agents came, imposed demands, and disrupted our lives. We were people who were long time traders and we were used to giving and expecting in return some sort of reciprocal exchange. We could live with the presence of these others if this included dignified treatment in return for hosting them. We were severely disappointed in our colonial negotiations. In this sense, the Islander struggle against governments was always a struggle for freedom; the struggle to reassert ourselves in the face of being 'duded' or 'screwed over' by these outsiders - the struggle to get out from under The Act. The struggle to get the lid off the box in which we were contained, as one Islander put it.

We are in a closed box and wait for the lid to be taken off. (Torres Strait Islander to the Deputy Chief Protector in Report 22 February 1936, p. 3, cited in Sharp, 1993, p. 197)

We are free today, still incredibly over-regulated by the presence of other interests in our region, and still being 'duded'. In the days of Bjelke-Petersen, Torres Strait Islanders often used to refer to the Torres Strait as the biggest mushroom farm in the country. A place where we were kept in the dark and fed a lot of bullshit.

So when I was growing up the political struggle was in part trying to understand what was being withheld from us, as we tried to engage white people on equal terms. Ours was a struggle to know and understand the world from where these people and their ways came. So Islanders, in the quest 'to come up equal', saw the value of being educated in the white man's knowledge. This was not just for pragmatic economic reasons in our changing lives, but also for political reasons – to understand how we kept losing out no matter how hard we worked for our living, to understand how the bastards robbed us, as my grandfather put it. In the quest to know what was withheld from his generation, my grandfather had chaired an Inter-Island meeting in 1944, in which Islanders called for "a bit of that university education you have down south" (Councillor Conference Minutes, 1944).

I think my personal history, as a Torres Strait Islander, predisposed me to see the value of mastering the Western disciplines. I didn't come to university to have others explain to me who I was, or what my cultural identity meant for the way I should think and what I should learn. I came to understand how others thought. Not because I wanted to think like others – but so I understood what I was engaging with, in my contests with other ideas.

The idea – still commonly put about - that being educated in the Western disciplines puts Indigenous people at risk of being whitewashed, I found wholly insulting to our intelligence.

I was at the time what you might call an angry person. The best advice I was given as an undergraduate was by my Honours supervisor, Prof Allan Luke. He said, 'It's OK to be radical, Martin, but you don't want to be radically dumb'. He encouraged me in my quest to engage the big picture and all positions.

As Indigenous people, we are not making the best use of a higher education if we are only prepared to see the big picture in simple terms as 'us and them', 'either, or', 'for or against'.

Opportunities in higher education are not well used if we, Indigenous Australians, are content to just be reactive to every instance of outrage or upset we feel. But a higher education is important if we are going to think through in measured ways, workable solutions for improved services, opportunities, and futures for our communities.

Every Indigenous person has their own personal goals for undertaking higher education studies. Higher education enables individuals to pursue their own interests, secure work and a reasonable living. But Higher education also provides the best opportunity for Indigenous Australians to enlarge the frames of reference we need to understand how the wider world works and to negotiate our way in and through it, both personally and collectively.

For my own children, I have always argued that

They will always, without question, be perceived as girls of colour and to contend with this I feel as my father, grandfather and great-grandfather did, that what they need most is an understanding of the political nature of their position, and that requires both the language and the knowledge of how that positioning is effected in the mainstream world. They also need a way of maintaining themselves in the face of it, as well as working against that knowledge system that continues to hold them to the position that it has produced for them. (Nakata 1993, p. 14)

For the last 20 years I have worked in three universities, directing in different places Indigenous research, student support, and teaching programs in Indigenous Studies. Like schooling, there have been improvements in all these areas, hard fought for by Indigenous people. But like schooling, there has not been enough improvement in the educational outcomes we seek.

The big picture is often hard to domesticate when you are down on the ground trying to deal with crisis and bureaucratic blockage day to day.

My experience has led me to see the major tension in Indigenous higher education to be not so much the tensions between equal and culturally appropriate education. Yes, in some contexts and situations this is a central dilemma. But to me the current major tension emerges between the big picture project that we call Indigenous higher education and the many smaller projects in different areas of Indigenous higher education. One of these areas is the undergraduate education of Indigenous students and another is Indigenous student support.

Other areas of effort include attention to Indigenous research, Indigenous content in degree programs, Indigenous scholarship in the disciplines, Indigenous Studies scholarship and its development as an area of teaching and learning, Indigenous postgraduate issues, and the education of non-Indigenous students about Indigenous people and issues. And then at the top level across all these endeavours are issues of Indigenous policy, governance, administration and employment in universities.

All these things are important if we are to achieve real justice and develop better understanding of Indigenous peoples place in the world. All these things count in our effort to ensure Indigenous people can engage meaningfully in higher education and succeed. But, in universities, it is important not to confuse the broader longer term change agenda and the more immediate task of making sure Indigenous students have the best chance of succeeding in their elected undergraduate programs.

I think that over the years we have relied too much on the larger change agenda to improve Indigenous student's chances of success in higher education, through a sort of trickle on effect. It is important to distinguish the education of Indigenous undergraduates from other areas of Indigenous effort in universities. And yet at the same time it is important not to lose site of the connections between them.

Over the last few decades, a number of overarching frameworks have guided our approaches and conditioned what we can achieve in higher education. From the university side, concepts of social justice, social inclusion and equity frame and rationalise the responses of universities' policies and processes to Indigenous concerns. Indigenous rationales and responses are conditioned by two main frameworks. Organisationally, the cultural framework guides the intersection of Indigenous practices and institutional practices, including student support. Academically, a decolonising framework guides Indigenous research and scholarship goals, Indigenous Studies teaching and learning goals, and the embedding of Indigenous content in programs. All these frames work to bring about adjustments to mainstream practices to be responsive to our presence, our interests and needs in higher education and academia.

Attention to Indigenous students and Indigenous student support has been caught up in the discursive intersections between all these conceptualisations and frames. How we understand and talk about the learning needs of Indigenous students emerges from within these intersections. My experience over the years has been that the educational goals and the learning needs of individual students are often subordinated to the broader concerns of the Indigenous cultural and decolonising frames. Likewise, my experience at all levels in universities has been that the progression of Indigenous interests is often subordinated to the rather personal, missionary, or ideological notions that many non-Indigenous staff have in relation to such things as culture, social justice, equity, process, and so on.

In my view, the social justice, equity, cultural and decolonising agendas that have framed reform in higher education and academia have been very useful frameworks for reconfiguring the relationships between Indigenous people, universities, and academia. But these frameworks are less useful for thinking about the educational issues of students.

I have said in other places, that Indigenous student learning support has been badly neglected over the years and has been riddled with complacency and a lack of scrutiny. Many student support centres have struggled to meet the needs of a growing Indigenous student cohort that is increasingly diverse in terms of socio-economic background, educational background, and the disciplines in which they study. We all have to do better.

As the far northern regional university whose student catchment area includes the Torres Strait, Cape York and north western areas of the state, the challenges for James Cook University are enormous and complex. We have 770 Indigenous students and the numbers are growing. Indeed to reach population parity levels of the region, we should have double the numbers. Progression and completion rates however continue to keep our students at the bottom end. What these poor outcomes mean is not just disappointment for indigenous individuals. It is also detrimental to our north Queensland economy when capacities are not fully developed. It means also that the far north Queensland Indigenous community has a growing HECS debt burden but is not getting the full benefits that should come from their investment. We have to do better in our efforts to retain and support students through to timely completions.

A change agenda is warranted; and business as usual, is insupportable.

“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” (Einstein Quote)

The challenges JCU faces present opportunities to innovate and improve our approach to Indigenous student support for this specific context.

My approach to student support reform has been to subordinate the overarching cultural framework that has traditionally guided its practice. My argument is that the primary framework has to be an educational one. What does an educational framework offer to student support? It moves attention to the development of Indigenous students' educational

capacities – the capacities they will need to meet the demands of their degrees and graduate with the best degrees they can achieve - capacities they will need to negotiate their way professionally and in their civic and private lives.

This means placing a concern for students' educational success at the centre of everything we do. Concern for students has to come before anything else. It means understanding our students as sharing some common challenges. But it also means understanding our students as individuals, who have different goals, different educational histories and starting points, who face different challenges in their different degrees, who have different sets of personal circumstances, and who require different levels and forms of assistance, at different times throughout their studies. It means us as a university being prepared to meet their needs. It means thinking about what we do and whether what we do is enough or effective. It means being prepared to re-evaluate what we offer in terms of support.

Now this is what we all think we are doing. In everything that is done, we think we are putting students first and supporting them so that they succeed. But if we look at the outcomes, we are failing to support students. To borrow from Vincent Tinto (2008), one of the foundational American transition theorists, equal access to higher education without the provision of effective support does not provide equal educational opportunity.

It is time for a radical re-think, and we must accept that it is crazy to keep thinking that we can keep doing what we have always done. Indeed it reminds me of Einstein's view of insanity:

“doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

If we are concerned to support Indigenous students so that they develop the capacities they need to succeed, then we must start with a big picture of their educational journey. The big picture starts with the continuing poor outcomes of schooling. These outcomes, past and present, mean that the majority of Indigenous school-leavers and mature age students will require special access conditions. However, it is easy to set students up to fail if the gap between their knowledge and skills and the requisite or assumed knowledge and skills needed for the programs in which they enrol is too wide. Unless we intervene and provide the right support they need to overcome these gaps, we will continue to lose them.

Under an educational framework, it is the selection and admissions stage which is the fulcrum or the pivot from which we must design our interventions at the pre-entry stage and in the post-admissions stage, during the period of university study. What are the minimal capacities we want students to have before we admit them; how will we determine if students have sufficient capacity to succeed with the support that we can provide; can our traditional forms of assessment do this; and what do we have to provide them after we admit them to ensure they continue to develop the capacities they need to succeed.

Pre-entry activities should begin the process of developing capacity. This might begin with aspirations for higher education, as it does now. But aspiration building activities that are not matched with a realistic notion of what academic learning and study involves do not build prospective student's self-efficacy levels sufficiently. If the gap, between a student's aspiration and the self-belief that they can actually do it, is too wide or full of doubt, then either students will be overwhelmed by the challenges once they are enrolled or they won't come at all. In many places, pre-entry activities are too recreational in nature, too much like holiday camps. Yes, they have to be fun and enjoyable but they have to be serious and focussed on capacity building at the same time. Participation in these programs should also see an acceptable rate of conversion to enrolments. We have to think about the design of these programs and about how we select students to participate in them.

As prospective students move closer to the point of admission, preparatory and enabling programs begin to appear as pathways into university. The design of pathways is critical in this region. Many of these are not well designed for Indigenous students and not well articulated to degree programs. Many enabling and preparatory programs across the country are so general or condensed that they fail to distinguish between the different knowledge and skills required for different degrees. This is particularly the case with degrees requiring Mathematics. I have come across instances where enabling programs have condensed HSC Level 1 & 2 maths into 6 months. I have seen students fall over in Clinical practice because of the lack of basic maths; I have seen Business students fall over because the supplementary maths program was more geared to engineering students. With a more focussed approach to skill them in the maths they needed, they might have all managed.

At the admission point, it is also how we select students that is critical to their chances of success. There has to be a clear understanding of what it will require for students to have a chance to succeed in their preferred program. This requires faculty involvement and staff who have a very good understanding of the different demands of different programs in different faculties. But this also requires Indigenous involvement, staff who are familiar with student circumstances, staff who understand the nature of students' challenges, and staff who are familiar with the personal or psycho-social attributes required for persistence in the face of challenges.

We all know, or should know, that ATARs or OPs are only one indicator for success. Just as important are student's attributes: motivation, determination, persistence, resilience; self-efficacy, self-regulation, self-responsibility, self-awareness. In my experience, these attributes make a difference and I have seen students with low scores or no scores go on and do well because they have these strong personal qualities.

But we know as well, that students with high ATARs and OPs can fall over. A high score does not necessarily mean a student will not be full of self-doubt about their capacity or that they will seek help when they get into trouble. High scores do not necessarily mean that students will have sufficient levels of self-efficacy or resilience in the face of setbacks to manage independently.

So we have to be careful about what informs selection decisions and what assumptions we make about student capacity. And what we must remember is that these capacities – academic and personal – can be developed and strengthened through the ways we provide support. Just as we would never exclude a high scoring student, so we should not overlook a low scoring student or a student with no educational attainment. But we do have to be looking at students' commencing capacity levels on balance. Selection hits the mark best when there is cooperation between Indigenous personnel and College staff and where there are a range of assessment or diagnostic tools applied. The exchange and flow of information and expertise is critical in this area.

The third element of selection decisions pertain to students' circumstances and the conditions under which they will be studying. Stable and adequate finance and stable and appropriate accommodation are critical factors in success and the main reasons for withdrawal. Time for study is critical. Students have to have a realistic sense of what successful study will take and be given good advice in this area. It is the University's and my role to find more scholarships and cadetships, more donors, more accommodation options for Indigenous students before they commence. And we need to work much closer with Centrelink about Abstudy entitlements. These conditions affect the social and emotional wellbeing of students and social and emotional wellbeing is an indicator of success that we need to pay more attention to in our sector. Once again, there is much we can do to support Indigenous students' social and emotional wellbeing. More attention has to be paid to the development of these capacities

in our students, as they study. The management of emotional stress, in particular, is a prerequisite for managing in difficult professional arenas.

But there is more to selection than screening students in or out. Those screened out must be given sound advice and be redirected via another pathway, so they can try again the following year. We need to continue to view these students as prospective students and remain in contact with them.

However there is added value that should come from pre-entry and selection processes. These stages present opportunities to collect basic profile knowledge about our students. One of the biggest failures of Indigenous student support across the country has been the failure to reach out and support all students. We cannot support students if we don't know them: what programs they are enrolled in, their educational starting points, their strengths and vulnerable points, their personal challenges in health, family life, accommodation and finance.

The task of student support once students are admitted is to keep building from there. We cannot provide critical interventions to support their success if we do not keep in contact, if we do not monitor their progress. They will not come to seek help, if we do not let them know that we care about what happens to them, all of them. Intervention has to come early to avoid failure and withdrawal, and so we need to be organised by commencement, by Orientation week.

I have observed over the years, an ambivalence towards the provision of too much support for Indigenous students. There is an anxiety that too much support, particularly academic support, will encourage dependence and that students will not become the self-reliant, self-regulated, autonomous or independent learners that they are expected to be in higher education.

But our early research findings from an ARC project on Indigenous academic persistence suggests that students who use learning support can and do, indeed are highly motivated to, move from dependence to independence in managing their learning, as long as the support they are given fits their needs at the time and assists them to develop their capacities to manage on their own. Students seem to move from using support to work through content and skills difficulties, to using it to work out and refine their strategies for learning and for study so they can improve their results, to then reducing their use of support when they feel in charge of what they are doing.

Our research reveals that academically-able students who use support when they think they could succeed without it, use it to improve their results. Sometimes they use support to speed up their movement towards independence, by seeking to develop their personal strategies and habits. Sometimes they use support to keep motivated and on top of things, when their self-regulation begins to slip. This can only mean better quality academic engagement and better graduate qualities.

To encourage students to take control of their own learning, those in support roles have to understand the learning challenges and processes which students have difficulties with. They have to check that the form of support is working and that what they do is enabling students to gradually become more independent.

Indigenous people have long criticised deficit-based approaches in education. But do we know what it looks like in student support? A deficit-based approach confines itself to a view of academic support as remedial work in content and skills areas for a limited period of time. A strength-based approach, on the other hand, views academic capacity in all its aspects, as something developmental and incremental, and which presents differently for different students in different disciplines at different stages of degrees.

I have had the privilege of knowing a student who used ITAS tutors in every subject, in every year, throughout her degree. She was the most focussed and hardworking student. She had, like the many others, entered university without the requisite score for her program. She knew she did not have the right skills set and so she was focussed on what she had to do to succeed. She graduated on time with Honours. She is now an aerospace engineer with Qantas and her Honours thesis was all on fuel freezing points, latitudes, and atmospheric temperatures on flight paths over the Antarctic. Qantas gave her a cadetship while she was studying, she worked there in the holidays. At the selection point, the Dean of Engineering advised her to take an enabling maths before she started, which she did. The Indigenous support team knew she had it in her – she had walked the Kokoda trail while at high school. This student had all the necessary attributes – motivation, interest, self-direction, self-efficacy, self-regulation. She had learning support, financial support and stable accommodation. That’s what it took. But her success was really due to her effort in applying herself to her course and working to be independent. Though her own effort, she succeeded.

Don’t ever let it be said that our kids don’t have the capacity to succeed. Or that too much support breeds a passive dependence. It is our job, not theirs, to work out how to provide support in a way that enables them to take charge of their own learning and become independent in time. The lesson for those of us in student support is that we just can’t demand students develop their capacities, we have to assist them to do so, by providing effective supports.

The most challenging aspect of ensuring students’ success along this journey from pre-entry to completion, is the question of how to organise and develop the different aspects that require attention. We need three main things:

- Student capacity
- Student support
- Student finance

For students to succeed, they need stable finance and accommodation options for as many students as possible and for pre-entry activities. That means scholarships, cadetships and sponsors. We need good relationships with Colleges, student services, and other relevant areas of the university, who all understand that the goal is improved student retention and improved completions of commensurate standards. We need accessible student spaces that encourage a sense of belonging to their own student community and to the university.

But most urgently of all for JCU, we need to reframe and reorganise the way we provide student support services to place the focus on the development of the capacities they need to succeed. Reframing student support also means that the functions and roles of student support staff need careful thought to meet the needs of students. It requires that staff have appropriate skills sets and useful systems support. Where these skills sets and systems and processes are not sufficient they must be developed with more priority. The development of Indigenous staff capacity should also be a priority to value-add to the wealth of knowledge and experience they already have about Indigenous people and issues. The annual calendar of activities, that are conducted in tandem with other sections of the university, in marketing and outreach, in pre-entry, in selection, admissions, and student orientation and support require careful review and calibration to enable academic persistence.

Concluding remarks

The role of those who direct student support is a complex one. Those of us who are charged with management responsibilities have to oversee the development and implementation of systems and processes that will enable support staff to know all Indigenous students and their educational histories and starting points, to anticipate their needs for support, to plan for and

organise that support, to provide early interventions to avoid early failure or withdrawal, to monitor student progress, to keep track of student outcomes, to evaluate and refine the strategies of student support officers, and to adjust where indicated the overall strategic direction. We need IT systems to track student progress and track our efforts to support them. We need statistical data, analyses and standardised reports that are useful for our purposes, our own internal accountability purposes. This will take a university-wide approach, one that needs to include the whole of the Indigenous higher education journey, from outreach and pre-entry activities to graduation and employment. We cannot do this without better information architecture and systems.

Re-thinking and reforming Indigenous student support is never an easy task but it is doable if we work together. Change processes are always difficult and generally messy. But our communities in North Queensland, indeed, Indigenous students, deserve and need us all to make a greater effort. We owe it to them and the futures of our community. But we also owe it to those Indigenous people who have gone before us and who struggled to make things better for us in education. People like Eddie Koiki Mabo, who stood up in the 1970s and established a school to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's chances to benefit from education. Koiki Mabo, a great Island man, who we honour here today.

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