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AIME and the University of Wollongong: The Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience

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Abstract

The collaborative research partnership between the University of Wollongong and the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME), an Indigenous community organisation, has grown from internal university funding to national funding. This mutually beneficial partnership has resulted in: outputs to AIME for use in their program; funded educational opportunities for Indigenous students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels; and the design of statistical tools for the collection of quantitative data on the program.

Keywords

mentoring, indigenous, experience, australian, aime, wollongong, university

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Working together to increase Indigenous students' educational participation nationally: A case study of partnership between the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) and the University of Wollongong



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Description: This case study details a collaborative relationship between a university and an Indigenous community organisation. The research partnership, between the University of Wollongong and the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME), has grown from internal university funding to national funding. This is a mutually beneficial partnership for both parties, resulting in: outputs to AIME for use in their program; funded educational opportunities for Indigenous students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels; and the design of statistical tools for the collection of quantitative data on the program.

Partners:

- University of Wollongong, NSW
- Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience, Redfern, NSW 2016
- Dr Gawaian Bodkin Andrews, Macquarie University, Sydney

Objectives: While young Indigenous people are reported as increasingly interested in attending university (Behrendt et al, 2012) access and retention rates fall far below the levels required for equitable representation (AIHW, 2014). The AIME program addresses this educational inequity through a mentoring program designed to improve high school completion rates of Australian Indigenous students. Whilst statistics show that AIME has achieved successes in this field, there has been little on-going empirical data gathered on this model. The partnership between UOW and AIME was designed to analyse and evaluate progress against key performance indicators and report on the viability of the expansion. The UOW-AIME research partnership has received half a million dollars in evaluation and research funding, including the award of an ARC Discovery Project (2014-16).



Activities: This partnership has spanned over four years and this longitudinal nature has forged a productive relationship with the AIME organisation. Previously, the UOW team had completed an evaluation of the AIME Outreach approach to mentoring, with our work enabling us to identify the impacts of the Outreach program (whole day across the year sessions) as compared to the Core program (weekly sessions). Our research indicated the potentially greater reach of the Outreach program, which enables more Indigenous high school students to access AIME mentoring. Currently, our research with AIME is focused on three key areas: (i) how AIME engages mentees and how this connects with educational futures, (ii) how mentoring works in the AIME program and (iii) investigating the impact on mentors.

At all times our work with AIME is characterised by flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of the organisation. To this end we have employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The partnership team has also strived to provide mutual benefit for all stakeholders and has engaged in capacity building in the form of creating new survey instruments, development of mentor digital stories and also, providing advice / support to other AIME research activities outside the remit of projects undertaken.

Outcomes: There are ongoing outcomes for all parties. This has included the dissemination of key data and evidence that has largely supported the ongoing benefits of the AIME model. The next stage of research will seek to qualify the ways in which AIME successfully engages with Indigenous young people and how this approach can be harnessed and reproduced on a national basis. Multiple site visits have been conducted across Australia in order to build relationships and develop deeper understanding of how the program connects with the young people. To date we have observed AIME programs at fourteen locations, and at completion of fieldwork we will have spoken with over 100 young Indigenous Australians. The reflective nature of this partnership has also enabled strong bonds to be developed with the organisation and this has led to joint publications with the AIME Research Director, as well as the development of an UOW/AIME PhD scholarship. We have also adapted approaches to data analysis, engaging in group analysis so that a range of perspectives and epistemologies can be applied to the data collected.

Partnership 'working': Our research activities are aligned with protocols for research with Indigenous Australians, as described by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS, 2011). As such our research partner works with us to develop activities, which are discussed, planned and developed collaboratively. We engage in ongoing feedback between the university and AIME; incorporating changes in line with discussions. Maintaining a respectful relationship with AIME, inclusive of staff at the central administrative level and on the ground, is the cornerstone of our practice.

"The research partnership works so well The expertise they have passed on to us has helped not only the external research they are involved with, but also our internal research processes".

Amy Priestly, Research Director AIME.

Initiated in 2010 by conversations between Prof. Paul Chandler and researchers, A/Prof Valerie Harwood and Dr. Sarah O'Shea, the partnership has grown with time. Prof. Chandler, who sits on the Board of Directors for AIME, supported relationship development between the researchers and AIME. The team has also built collaborations with Indigenous researchers with the AIME partnership including Dr Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews from the Warawara Department of Indigenous Education, Macquarie University.

This partnership is characterised by trust and reciprocity, characteristics that can only emerge through authentic engagement with a community organisation. Each member has evidenced their individual commitment to the AIME program and its goals through various means including participation in AIME fundraising events, committee membership and as mentioned, provision of advice and input on other activities. Output from this partnership is not owned by any of the parties and as such has been drawn upon in different and significant ways to that initially envisaged.

Importantly, the team works closely with AIME staff 'on the ground' to develop relationships and build effective communication. This respectful and ongoing nature of relationship building has enabled the collection of deep and descriptive data; this we feel is the key element to the success of this partnership.



Future Activities: Current partnership activities are funded until 2017. As AIME grows and evolves, we envisage this relationship will continue. To understand the impact of this organisation on the lives of young Indigenous people, careful and ongoing analysis is required. An assessment of this kind can only come with time; so the team is already planning future research partnerships. As a team we regard this partnership as a key means to foreground the work and successes of AIME and bring these to public, political and scholarly attention. Our approach will continue to be two-fold, involving the provision of rigorous data (quantitative and qualitative) and scholarly publications. Through the provision of **both** empirically based research and scholarly literature, we hope that the particular approach that AIME has adopted is both replicated in other equity environments and recognised nationally as a best practice model.

Basic Mind Map: We are a social/community partnership

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