INDIGENOUS SUCCESS PODCAST WITH HOPE PERKINS MASTER

Voiceover
Welcome to Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it with Dr Katelyn Barney and Professor Tracey Bunda.

Dr Barney
Hi everyone, I'm Katelyn, and welcome to our podcast series, "Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it". I'd like to start the podcast by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands we're recording this today, and pay our respects to their ancestors and their descendants who continue to have strong spiritual and cultural connections to Country. I'd also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands where you are listening from today and pay my respects to them as well.

The podcast series focuses on what works in outreach programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students. This series is a part of a suite of resources developed from an Equity Fellowship that I undertook in 2020 that was funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and it focuses on success factors that are based on key findings from the Fellowship. Each episode is an interview with an Indigenous staff member or a university student about aspects of effective outreach. I'm a non-Indigenous woman born and raised on Jagera and Turrbal Country and I'm joined by my co-host and colleague, Professor Tracey Bunda who is part of the advisory group on the Fellowship.

Dr Bunda

Thanks Katelyn. Hello everybody. As Katelyn said, I'm Tracey Bunda. I'm a Ngugi/Wakka Wakka woman and I'm the Director for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies unit and head of academic programs within that unit at the University of Queensland. You would have noted that Katelyn and I are calling the series, "Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it" and of course that raises questions straight away; what does "Indigenous success" mean, and I was thinking about that, Katelyn, and I was reflecting on the influences within my life that have informed my life experiences, and the ways in which I'm able then to perform leadership, enact leadership. It makes me think too, about the ways in which our cultural life as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people helps inform that as well.

In the podcast, you're going to hear Katelyn and I waiver between using "Indigenous", "Aboriginal" and "Torres Strait Islander", "First Nations", so we'll move between each of those sort of namings.

Dr Barney
And we hope that the podcast series is particularly of use and interest for outreach practitioners working in universities, but also we hope it's of interest to people who have an interest in student success and student equity in higher education more generally as well.

Our guest today is Hope Perkins who is Indigenous Engagement Coordinator in the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology at the University of Melbourne. Welcome, Hope.

Hope Perkins
How are you, Katelyn?

Dr Bunda
Hope, would you like to introduce yourself in whatever way is most comfortable for you?

Hope Perkins
Absolutely. Thank you, Tracey. I'm extremely fortunate and privileged to have a rich ancestry in lineage from the Eastern Arunta group in the Northern Territory, my father's side, and the Pilbara region in Western Australia on my mother's side, as the descendant of the Namal people. My grandmother's Country in the Pilbara from the Nyamal side covers east of the Kariyarra Country encompassing the towns of Marble Bar and Nullagine past Oakover River, and Ngala Country and south past Shaw River. My grandmother's Country from my Eastern Arunta side from Central Australia covers Alcoota Station, Amoongana across the Plenty River, and Todd River. I also have German and English ancestry. I grew up in Canberra and went to school in Canberra and Melbourne has been home for the last 25 years.

Dr Bunda

Thanks Hope. So you're a proper desert girl.

Hope Perkins
Proper desert breed.

Dr Bunda
A proper desert breed.

Hope Perkins
Yes. Oh my God. I'm almost a local now that I've been in Melbourne for 25 years but I certainly am an absolutely desert breed through and through.

Dr Barney
Thanks, Hope. Can you tell us a bit about your role at the university?

Hope Perkins
As you mentioned, Katelyn, I work in the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology at the University of Melbourne, and I was recruited approximately seven years ago to develop the Indigenous Pathway Program into Engineering and Information Technology. At that time, nothing existed in terms of programs or a strategy as such, and previous efforts that they had attempted were without any success. And I'm also the program lead for the Victorian Indigenous Engineering Winter School and the Worawa Aboriginal Girls' College Technology Program.

Dr Barney
Can you tell us a bit more about VIEWS – that's the acronym isn't it, for the program that you're involved with?

Hope Perkins
[Overtalk 0:05:14] one of my engineering colleagues came up with. They're very good at creating acronyms and that is essentially the Victorian Indigenous Engineering Winter

School. So, it's a collaboration between the University of Melbourne, Monash, RMIT, and Swinburne Universities for Years 10, 11 and 12 Indigenous high school students who are currently studying maths and/or science who are interested in an engineering or information technology pathway. It's a five-day long program and it includes the opportunity to explore four different campuses who offer very different strengths in engineering and IT disciplines; different options and different study pathways for our students to have a look at, to experience, and get a sense of.

The program also provides relevant/real-life experience of engineering and information technology through industry site visits and workshops, hands-on workshops to develop problem-solving and design skills, and experiential learning. Part of the program has a strong cultural component which is we have our students connect with Indigenous Elders from Victoria, Indigenous mentors, and the Indigenous support units. We also have Indigenous university students as part of the program, and Indigenous engineers and information technology specialists who are currently working in industry.

Dr Bunda
I want to go back to an aspect that you think is really wonderful within the camps that you manage, and just talk about that a little bit further. You talked about the collaboration between the various universities there in Melbourne, you talked about industry opportunity – which aspect would you really highlight there that the participating students really get a benefit out of?

Hope Perkins
The collaborative aspects of the partnership – Melbourne, RMIT, Swinburne, and Monash coming together – is something they actually really quite like because we all have very different pathway options and this is the only program in the tertiary sector that we will not compete with. So, we are genuinely working together because we want parity in graduations, in the students coming through, and I don't know – I'm happy to be proven wrong – of any other partnership that exists where we won't compete with each other. So, students like that because they get an experience of each different university pathway option; as an example at Melbourne we have a master's program, Monash has a degree program, RMIT and Swinburne have a non-degree pathway option. So, we've tried to combine everything that we don't have as an example, and we're stronger together. We're not competing with each other for recruitment or student numbers; it's the experience and actually having students get a taste of the different options from different universities.

Dr Barney
Can you tell us, Hope, a bit more about those cultural aspects that you mentioned because that was a theme that came through in the Fellowship was that students and staff saw that as a real strength of some programs was the cultural aspects of camps? Can you talk a bit more about how those are included in this program?

Hope Perkins
Engineering and IT are very technical skills and very discipline-specific so we're really conscious about having a cultural element embedded into the program for a more comprehensive and holistic experience for the students. We have a multi-faceted approach; the start of the program is traditionally a formal Welcome to Country and a smoking ceremony from either Aunty Di or Uncle Bill who are Wurundjeri local Elders, and this essentially provides safe passage to our students who are coming from across Australia to

Wurundjeri land. So, this is an important statement to say that "You are safe. We welcome you and we will be with you for this week". Aunty Di and Uncle Bill always stay at the beginning of the program, at the induction, and they present to students as part of the formal induction process, and this is to ensure that they're provided information on the land that they're on, some background, some context, as I mentioned, to provide safe passage and to make it really clear that they're available for the duration of the program if any student wants to connect or ask questions.

So that's how the program starts. Then we also incorporate Indigenous-led activities into the program which complements the discipline-specific side of engineering and IT and the hands-on workshops component. For example, the two activities we ran in the last program were a guided tour of the Birrarung. The Birrarung is what you may know of as the Yarra River here in Melbourne but it's called the "Birrarung". The tour is really through Indigenous eyes, and it includes a discussion of the history of engineering and modification since European settlement and the pre-European history of the river. So this was a really interesting exercise as the students then adopted those learnings from this experience to a design workshop that we had at Arup, which is one of our industry partners.

So, the students were given a design brief for a client, which was a real life client of Arup's and the students were asked to respond to the design brief – they were given a budget, they were given a client, they were given a timeframe, they were given a risks portfolio about what some of the potential problems could be, et cetera, and what was fascinating was that the students in this workshop exercise actually applied some of the concepts and ideas from the Birrarung walk into the project. In Victoria, there are two totems; one is called "Waa" which is the crow, and "Bunjil" which is the eagle and they are very special totems here in Victoria, especially around the precincts that the visit is on, and the students incorporated that into the design.

Birrarung was a significant meeting place for Aboriginal groups – groups would come together, share a meal, have special ceremonies, and today, what is known as Southbank has a very similar purpose but in a different context, so it's a really important exercise in terms of getting students to observe the current environment and what was previous to European settlement, and working those, I guess, concepts into a design brief for a large company.

A second example of the content built into the program was the Marngrook activity. "Marngrook" is a borrowed word from the Gunditjmara people of South-West Victoria, which means "game ball". It was the traditional game that was played with a possum skin ball down here in Victoria and our VIEW students took part in a Marngrook activity which connected the students to the place they were visiting, and really provided a bit of provenance and history of Marngrook. Yes, so those are two examples of some of the cultural activities that we have included into the VIEWs program.

Dr Barney
Hope, do you think the students make connections with each other during the program, and what do you think are the kind of benefits of those connections they might make?

Hope Perkins
I think one of the things I've observed in the last certainly five years of VIEWS is that when students first arrive, they're absorbing everything around them, so they may be extremely quiet, they may be listening and observing, but towards the end of the program, a lot of the

students have formed really good friendships, and also working relationships in the sense that they have had to do workshops and team-based activities together and they've also been living together for five nights. So, the surveys tell us – some of the feedback that we've had is that in addition to the hands-on workshops, experiencing some really great world-class facilities around activities, the fact that they had a connection during the week with other students who were of like-mindedness to them, because they all had some commonality; you know, the students come from all over the country but there was some commonality they had together in some way or another, whether it be the fact that they really loved problem-solving, they really loved analysing things, they loved working things out.

They might be from a similar state – living together for five nights in a residential environment, being in a city that they've never experienced before has obviously brought some of them together, and some of the best feedback we've had is that these students stay connected when they go back to their home lives. They might not stay connected to us, and bear in mind, the cohort is typically 15 to 17 year olds so their way of connecting might be through WhatsApp or a social media forum, but they definitely have connections when they go back, and some of them end up going to university together. How we try and keep everybody together is through an alumni network to make sure we keep them connected to us.

Dr Bunda
For all of this experience, and your work within the faculty, you would have a position now about Indigenous success, so would you mind to share that with the listeners, thank you.

Hope Perkins
I find "success" to be subjective. It means different things to different people, and depending on what life stage you're at and the individual. When I look at the Eastern Arrernte language, there's no word for "success", and you look in dictionaries that linguists have compiled, and there is no word for "success". The closest word that I've come across in Eastern Arrernte is "being peacefully and contentedly happy" and that word is "Mwarre". It's such an interesting concept because then when I look at say, an Oxford definition of "success" it defines it as "the accomplishment of an aim or purpose to gain fame, wealth, or social status, a person or thing that achieves success", so that then brings me back to it depends on what "success" means for the individual. The questions I asked are "How do you define 'success'? How do you measure 'success'?" The responses to these questions will vary depending on who you ask, and depending on the age group of the person you ask.

So, I think a successful Indigenous person may be a person who is someone that lives beyond the average life expectancy, or, a successful Indigenous person could be defined in terms of Indigenous people maintaining Indigenous culture, heritage, and language in today's society, or, is it a successful Indigenous person that can be defined in terms of being at the top of their game, the pinnacle of a career or chosen profession? So, I think "success" is so subjective – it really depends on the individual. Some of the ideas about "success" that I really resonate with is that inevitably all of us will face tough times and failure personally and professionally, and how you deal with that failure might be the most important thing as to whether or not you're going to succeed. There's just so many different aspects to what it means to be successful – that's a whole other podcast.

Dr Bunda
Thanks a lot. Thanks, Hope.

Dr Barney
Thank you, Hope.

Hope Perkins
Pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Dr Bunda
Katelyn and I both want to thank you for joining this podcast series, "Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, and being it". If you've got any questions about this podcast or any of the other podcasts that you may have listened to, please contact Katelyn on her email address – "k.barney…' – that is B-A-R-N-E-Y – k.barney@UQ.edu.au. Thank you very much, and we hope that you'll join us in the future.

[End of recording]