

Yarn: Evaluation of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tertiary Preparation program experience: An exploration of the program's contribution to First Nation student futures

Vicki Pascoe
Laurence Armstrong

Yarning with editors James Ballangarry, Monica McKenzie and Matt Lumb.

To cite this article:

Pascoe, V & Armstrong, L, (with Ballangarry, J, McKenzie, M, & Lumb, M) 2025 'Yarn: Evaluation of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tertiary Preparation program experience: An exploration of the program's contribution to First Nation student futures.' in Lumb, M, Gordon, R.B, McKenzie, M & Ballangarry, J (Eds.) Evaluation for Equity and Justice, an issue of *Access: Critical Explorations of Equity in Higher Education*, vol. 13 issue 1, pp. 148–152.

A paper on the research discussed in this yarn will be available in 2026 on the ACCESS journal platform.

Highlights from the yarn are included below. This is a summary of a rich connection between the editors and authors. It has been edited to provide a snapshot of themes and does not reflect the full yarn or the context behind each of the points made. It mainly follows the flow of conversation and we have attempted to show where cuts/edits have been made through formatting. The insights from this discussion, held in late 2025, have informed the editorial. They link across the concerns and motivations for evaluation for social justice.

This exchange with the SI editors offers insight from the authors on the challenges faced when trying to ensure contemporary higher education institutions actively value culturally safe, Indigenous-led programs. The yarn asks us to consider why an award-winning program would be discontinued and absorbed into a mainstream model without consultation. We are challenged by questions such as why rigid approaches to review and reporting are seen as legitimate when they are clearly unfit for purpose if we consider cultural standards of conduct. The authors argue for Indigenous co-designed evaluation in higher education, the valuing of culturally embedded preparatory programs, and the need for forms of reverence when an effort seeks to build knowledge with community members through evaluation research.

Moments from the yarn:

VP: Why did we start this, Laurie? We started it over a coffee, when we were reminiscing, because we both taught in this wonderful program... it was such a rewarding program, and when it kind of got shrunk and shoved in with something else, and... You know, we thought... Hang on, what's happened to this program? Laurie said, would it be great to go and talk to some of those students that completed the program and really talk about it with them? And then, of course, I said, that can be a piece of research. So, that's what we decided to do... you know, well, we saw great success from this program, and it wasn't necessarily in dollars, as in students going into undergraduate, but it was... it was everything, confidence, people building their... their own businesses, people getting promoted. Dramatically, because they could now write a report and reference, and, you know, just, just wonderful themes, and people saying, I now know I'm not stupid. Sowing those seeds with their families, and becoming sorts of role models, and very... even if they didn't go into undergrad, continually encouraging their children. And, you know, a lot of their children had great success, didn't they, Laurie?

JB: What made you see as that as being, key and important when it comes to evaluation? Like, why do you see those stories as so significant?

~~~~

LA: It was... it was obvious the value that our mob had got from the program in lots of different ways, and it wasn't really... the value... [the University measured] was only measured by one part of success, and that's who went into undergrad, and who, were successful in undergrad.

~~~~

JB: I am picking up the idea of purposeful evaluation... it's evaluation because you want to lead to, meaningful change. It's an act of... Resistance and Resilience. Against a system that has never worked. It wasn't designed for us and has never worked for us, and we're continuing to fight against that system, even when that system takes away achievements of the past... How do you do that? How do you use evaluation to fight against these systems and to show our value and our ways of doing things?... We're using a... a... we're attempting to use the [western] system, to navigate the [western] system, using our ways - if that's making sense?

~~~~

LA: We knew right from the beginning that we had to talk to [the people who did the program] first. We had... we had to have their voices. Before we can do anything, move forward, because the university's always got its agenda of how it's doing things and what it wants to do... If [the University's] got this information, it probably gets more credibility once it's published. I guess. And then they'll take notice, and more people will hear about it, and then we might have more of a starting point, because it almost seems like we have to start again.

MM: [As] researchers and evaluators, [how did you] come to create those safe spaces, or how did students, I suppose, feel that level of safety. And... and that power dynamic shift in... in the data

collection phase or process, and how did the institution support, or hinder any of those processes? Were people, comforted in sharing their stories? Talk to us a little bit about how that, that context played out.

LA: I think that, the people that we talk to they, they knew the program and trusted the program that we were talking about, even if they didn't know us. And what we noticed is that... so we already had that base, that trust base, and they were happy to, to share with us openly about, you know, their experiences... You know how over... because this program went for 20 years, so over that time, staff come and went, and Vicki and I were both part of it at certain times, but you know, we weren't there all the time, so even staff that... that when we weren't there.. they still had that same trust for us because of the program, and because we... and what happened... I remember why that program started, because I was around when it started, and I was part of that whole thing.

~~~~

JB: You tapped into generations of trust that was built up through this program, and people's association with this program.

~~~~

MM: Absolutely. And that idea that the Trust was associated to the Indigenous Education center, you know, as a support mechanism, rather than the individuals that, you know, had come back and forth through that work.

~~~~

LA: when you go through, like you guys have, no doubt, when you go through a university and you receive that support and help along the way. You really want to find a way to give it back, and these students that we, spoke to they were eager to do whatever they could to pass this on, because if there's one thing that our mob want to do, is we want to help other people, our mob, you know, as well. We want to try and get that across. And they were really keen, because it was almost like this was their chance to really be able to get it out there that, you know, that education was an... it was so important for them.

~~~~

JB: I'd love to be able to capture that in this yarn of, like, well, I'd love to hear from your arguments, saying why it is the right way [to do evaluation].

VP: It's our way.... If you're going to have some kind of rigid framework, you're not going to get the rich data that you want... Quite frankly, if you don't... if you can't have a trust relationship, and you can't have a good, open, honest conversation, and you want to stick to your Likert scale, good luck to you, but you're not going to get rich data... The way you do it. If people are going to give their stories to you, then you've got to treat them very carefully, and with great respect... And there's, you know, still a lot of talk about, well, you can't do that. That's obviously not valid, or

that's not robust, or whatever. But it actually is... It's just, I guess, putting more onus on having respect for that person who's gifting this to you.

~~~~

JB: And there's two things that I've actually, picked up from hearing those stories that you've shared, and that's, your intention behind the evaluation, and your intentions towards the participant, making sure your intentions are respectful... you as [researchers], it sounds like you were being open, and you were being honest, and you were being accepting and embracing, and you were somewhat modeling what you were hoping the participant would do. You're creating that space first... And, it seems to me that it's not just about what the participant gives, but it's also about what you give as the evaluator.

~~~~

LA: It's almost like we have to find a way to place ourselves as the learners, and those people with the knowledge as the ones With the power. And that's not always an easy thing to do.

~~~~

MM: I just thought about when you say, Laurie, that we're learners, thinking about how sometimes we say that we got *learnt*. Like, that kind of switch between, for us as Blakfellas, it's... you're... if you're a learner, it's... you got learnt, and that's how we sort of would say those things.

JB: ... [my people] don't say teach them, they say learn them, you know, because that's the emphasis on the learnings, not on the teaching.

~~~~

JB: thank you both so much. This has been very valuable to... to me, not just for the special issue, but on the personal side, it's been very valuable to me, like, you... the sharing your insights and your stories and your journeys and, even your passions of what you're trying to do, it's very inspirational.

~~~~

MM: And do you have any thoughts about, the importance of Aboriginal researchers or Aboriginal evaluators leading and designing and shaping and analysing this type of work?

~~~~

VP: It really does help if you can get the right lens onto the evaluation to actually be able to dig into people's stories and really hear what they're saying, and empathise with them, rather than continually struggling to fit it into some kind of, you know, script, or whatever, to understand that, that someone's story is a very special thing. And if someone is keen to share it with you all, it's a privilege....A lot of mainstream researchers don't have that ...reverence... I think we would have

got probably better data with us doing this research than a mainstream researcher. ...we knew the program, we remember teaching some of the students...

~~~~

LA: It's important to have the right person. Rather than just choose an Aboriginal person because they're Aboriginal. Yes, yep. Because there is some really... yeah, we know all the time that we've had special non-Indigenous people that have helped us.

MM: Yeah, look, I think one of the things that struck me, we touched... you touched on it briefly there, Vicky, about time, and I'm curious to know how, time played out in the data collection and the data analysis sort of phase of your work.

~~~~

VP: Well, we... yeah, time was fun. It took us a while to collect our data to start with, didn't it, Laurie? ... of course, we tried to organise interviews so that we could both be there, so, you know, that was quite a process. But we got a strong sense, didn't we, as we went by interview by interview about this confidence thing, these other themes started emerging...how... how things were then impacting for family, motivating kids, or partners, or friends, or that kind of stuff. That kind of... that probably worked in our favor. What didn't work in our favor was getting it written.

~~~~

LA: But when we did... now I think about it, it's just not something that you have to... You know, think about too much, but it seems natural that when we get ourselves with one of those participants. We want them to think like we've got all the time in the world.

~~~~

ML: but that's fascinating, the idea that you can...express...that you've got all the time in the world in that moment, and not impose upon a participant, a particular sense of...that extractive time, you know, this is my time to collect from you, but to create another whole world in time where that's felt, you know? That reverence that you talk about is deeply, deeply present. I think that's an amazing thing.