

2016 Mabo Lecture

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

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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, Dav0ob28 T TD [(av 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' (Mabo will be forever synonymous with Native Title but Koiki Mabo marked 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:

- (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;

But what was also passed down to me was the importance of trying to understand how the

Opportunities in higher education are not well used

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

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,

