

Experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social welfare students in human service organisations: Implications for practice

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FAST FACTS

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are under-represented in the social welfare workforce.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are significantly overrepresented as service users.
- More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work and welfare graduates are needed.
- All human service workers need to work in culturally respectful ways.

1. It is known that racism is an everyday experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is evident that social welfare professionals would not be immune to the influences of discriminatory ideologies.

Available literature identifies racism and discrimination in helping professions including social work. Social work is a contentious choice of profession for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians given social work's links to the Stolen Generation and the ongoing removal of children into State care.

2. This research was important because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are under-represented in the social welfare workforce and significantly overrepresented as service users.

The impact of colonisation is evident in the current health and welfare of Indigenous Australians. Previous research at JCU had identified significant barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work and welfare students in completing their degree.

Barriers included lack of recognition of cultural knowledge and strengths, students' material hardships, and a lack of culturally-informed curriculum.

3. What this research told us:

- Human service organisations need to do more to create culturally safe organisations that will enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to graduate.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' experiences of racism on placement provided evidence that some human service organisations were unsafe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.



Indigenous students' experiences in human service organisations

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

- Advanced cultural competence is required for staff to supervise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work and welfare students.
- These students may have their own experiences of loss of identity and trauma.
- Increased recognition is needed of discrimination experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in human service organisations.
- Culturally competent staff are essential to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to graduate and join the social work and welfare workforce.
- Culturally safe human service organisations enable workers to work well with families and communities.

4. Increased numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders graduates are required in the social work and welfare workforce –

- The above recommendation is repeated in ongoing reports and many Reconciliation Action Plans.
- Universities have a responsibility in getting students through their courses - but so do human service organisations.
- Organisations who accept Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on placement require staff with advanced cultural competence who create safe environments.
- **Organisations that are unsafe for students may be unsafe for workers and families.**
- **Culturally safe human service environments enable workers to work well with families and communities to increase families' wellbeing.**

This summary paper was written by Dorothy Savage and is based on research undertaken at James Cook University on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on field placement.

READ FURTHER:

Gair, S., Miles, D., Savage, D., Zuchowski, I. (2015). Racism unmasked: Experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on field placement. *Australian Social Work*, 68(1), 32-48.

Savage, D. & Gair, S. (2014) Hearing and understanding the past in order to strengthen the future. In A. Francis, et al, *Advancing social work in mental health through strengths-based approaches* (pp.172-183). Primrose Hall Publishing Group.

Zuchowski, I., **Savage, D.**, Miles, D. & **Gair, S.** (2013). Decolonising social work education: Challenging social work praxis, *Advances in Social Work & Welfare Education*, 15(1), 47-62.

Gair, S., Thomson, J. & **Savage, D.** (2005) What's stopping them? Barriers hindering Indigenous students completing a BSW at JCU, *Advances in Social Work & Welfare Education*, 7(1), 54- 66.