



Vol.4 No.2 (2021)

# Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching

ISSN : 2591-801X

Content Available at : <http://journals.sfu.ca/jalt/index.php/jalt/index>

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## Australian Aboriginal education: The impacts of Riawunna's Murina program pedagogy during Covid-19

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### Keywords

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Aboriginal education;  
COVID-19;  
enabling programs;  
Indigenisation;  
Information Technology;  
narrative;  
student success;  
student support;  
tertiary pedagogy.

### Abstract

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The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted our world on a major scale in 2020 and will continue to be part of our lives for some time to come. This paper examines how students in the Murina Program were supported by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Unit, the 'Riawunna Centre' at the University of Tasmania (UTAS), to help overcome the challenges of Covid-19 in 2020. It explores enrolment data, feedback and work samples provided by students about the ways in which Riawunna supported them to successfully transition to online learning and continue to meet unit level learning outcomes 2020. Data were collected in early 2021 and all ethical requirements for publication were met. The analysis of formal institutional level student feedback surveys suggest that Murina students highly valued the support provided by all Riawunna staff during the pandemic as highly critical to their engagement with Aboriginal pedagogy, through the sharing of Aboriginal knowledges and yarns within a curriculum that strengthened connections during this very challenging period. Ongoing research in this space will continue to investigate the impact of the Murina Program pedagogy to give students voice and agency to redefine their definition of success.

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### Article Info

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Received 9 August 2021

Received in revised form 28 September 2021

Accepted 29 September 2021

Available online 29 September 2021

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2021.4.2.13>

# 1. Introduction and background

The purpose of this paper is to examine the impacts of Riawunna’s Murina Program pedagogy during Covid-19 and present an analysis of student feedback about their online learning experiences in Australian Aboriginal education units of study during 2020, and to present conclusions from this analysis to guide further research in this important area. The first section introduces the Riawunna Centre at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) and its role in supporting Murina program students particularly during the transition to online learning during Covid-19 pandemic. The article then explores pertinent literature, the methods and methodology and the analysis and discussion of data. The article closes by presenting conclusions and making recommendations for future research specifically in the area of program efficacy and engagement in enabling programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

## 1.1 The Riawunna Centre and the Murina Program

The Riawunna Centre was established in 1991 with its primary role to strengthen the participation rate in higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Tasmania. Riawunna provides a range of programs and wrap around support for students to help them succeed and has a presence on all three UTAS campuses in Hobart, Launceston and Burnie. The Murina Program is a pathway program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students delivered by the Riawunna Centre since 1991 initially as a Bridging Program and changing its name to Murina in the mid 1990’s. Data between 1999-2020 reveals 532 Murina students have enrolled in the Murina Program with an average enrolment of 24 students per year over this time. In 2020, the focus period for this paper, 38 students were enrolled in the Murina Program with 10 of these students simultaneously enrolled in other UTAS courses by semester two and continuing into 2021, indicating good retention and participation rates for this current cohort.

Murina students engage in the program for a variety of reasons, however anecdotal evidence suggests that they enrol in the program principally to connect with community and each other, to express and strengthen their Aboriginal knowledges, to build their confidence, and to explore pathways beyond higher education, often taking their positive experiences back to their families and community. Many students who come into the program have experienced fragmented and disturbing formational educational experiences where their existence and recognition of rights as Tasmanian Aboriginal people continues to be an ongoing battle for justice in Lutruwita (Tasmania), so stepping foot onto university grounds is already a significant achievement and potential measure of success. To overcome barriers such as this, the Murina program has created a curriculum that values the lived experiences and knowledges of Aboriginal students through storytelling and yarning (a relaxed conversational approach suitable for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the classroom), creating a place-based and student-centred two-way pedagogy at the cultural interface (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010; Hall, 2015; Leroy-Dyer, 2018; Martin, 2014; Martin et al., 2017; Nakata,

2009; Ober, 2004).

In 2020 the Murina Program delivered six units or courses of study that focussed on strengthening and sharing Aboriginal knowledges using narrative approaches, whilst ensuring that key skills and knowledges needed to transition into further education were advanced. Table 1 presents an overview of these six units. Please refer to the glossary for the translation of unit title’s in palawa kani.

Table 1: Murina units of study 2020.

Semester One	Semester Two
RWA010 tunapri milaythina 1 The life, history and culture of Tasmanian Aboriginal people from invasion to the 1950’s.	RWA020 tunapri milaythina 2 The people, place and politics of Tasmanian Aboriginal people from the 1950’s to contemporary times within a national context
RWA030 University Preparation 1 Writing, research and study skills, that assist students to achieve success within a Tasmanian Aboriginal context.	RWA034 University Preparation 2 Advance the skills learnt in semester 1 within a Tasmanian Aboriginal context.
RWA148 kani Gathering Gathering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories to examine their style, messages and importance of preserving stories.	RWA149 kani Sharing Students sharing a story using any creative medium or narrative styles to create and share their stories to give voice.

The Murina Program uses a range of assessments to engage students through a Tasmanian Aboriginal lens, to share their voice through yarns, presentations and writing using different creative mediums. Assessments align with theories of Western learning and teaching alongside pedagogies of Indigenous knowledges and cultural understandings. Table 2 presents the breadth of assessment types provided in the Murina program using storytelling and yarning as defined earlier in this article to share stories in a relaxed manner to strengthen connections.

Table 2: Unit assessments 2020.

	Semester 1	
RWA010 tunapri milaythina 1 Assessment 1: 'Connection to Country' yarn	RWA148 kani Gathering Assessment 1 Research Diary (gathering)	RWA030 University Preparation 1 Assessment 1 Study Preparation
Assessment 2: 'Our People' Poster	Assessment 2 Mini Exhibition presentation	Assessment 2 Letter
Assessment 3: Cape Barren Island Life share	Assessment 3 Preserving Stories yarn	Assessment 3 Research and referencing
Assessment 4: Reflective Journal		Assessment 4 Sharing kani
RWA020 tunapri milaythina 2 Assessment 1: Political Event paper	Semester 2 RWA149 kani Sharing Assessment 1 Story Plan	RWA034 University Preparation 2 Assessment 1 Sharing
Assessment 2: Game Changer paper	Assessment 2 Create a story	Assessment 2 Draft Photo essay
Assessment 3: Quiz	Assessment 3 Share a story	Assessment 3 Final Essay Presentation

## 1.2 Online learning in the Murina Program prior to Covid-19

Experience over time suggests that Murina program students prefer to engage and learn in a face-to-face mode, through which they can interact and yarn with each other as they strengthen their connections and relationships. At the heart of Murina pedagogy is the sharing by Pakana people (Tasmanian Aboriginal people) and 'On Country' learning experiences to strengthen and celebrate Aboriginal knowledges – each usually requiring face to face learning. The face-to-face mode has also been an important space to build student's Information Technology skills and to strengthen their engagement through the University Learning Management System (LMS). Riawunna also provides access to computer labs and the opportunity for students to borrow laptops. Using a product called MoCow (Mobile computer) in 2019, the Murina Program introduced classroom based, internet enabled technology to facilitate synchronous Skype connectivity between classes across the three UTAS campuses. This product was instrumental in developing student capacity and confidence in technology, which in turn assisted in the 2020 pivot to online learning required by Covid-19.

## 1.3 Online learning in the Murina Program during Covid-19

Covid-19 impacted learning and teaching at UTAS in early March 2020 when all students and staff were required to socially distance and to engage where possible in fully online learning and teaching by the commencement of week four of Semester 1, March 16, 2020. This presented an unprecedented pedagogical challenge for the Riawunna team as it was unknown how Murina students would respond to fully online learning and the potential isolation from their Aboriginal community.

During Covid-19 the core Murina pedagogy of incorporating knowledge-holders and Connection to Country (acknowledging the significance and deep connections to Aboriginal lands, territories, seas and waterways) was honoured by inviting Aboriginal staff and Pakana knowledge holders into the virtual classroom to yarn and share stories to create a collaborative and engaging classroom experience for Murina students. A safe and supportive virtual classroom was created for Murina participants through regular online meetings and opportunities to engage and stay connected. The Riawunna team also supported students through its Financial Hardship Scheme by purchasing extra laptops and loaning these out with internet connection dongles for mobile internet access.

Individual student support during the transition to fully online learning was provided over the phone to support Zoom use and online web conferencing. Riawunna also worked closely with other UTAS programs such as UTAS Living (accommodation) and Wellbeing (counselling and workshops) for coordinated and holistic support around issues exacerbated by Covid-19 isolation and related factors.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Aboriginal higher education in Australia and Tasmania

Australian universities have “underperformed” in their obligations to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, with participation and retention in higher education by Australian Indigenous peoples being historically low (Universities Australia, 2017, p. 10). Coates et al. (2020) state that early “colonialised education” (p. 1) has left “a legacy of educational disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians” (p. 1). Andersen et al. (2017), Biermann and Townsend-Cross (2008), Hall (2015) and Leroy-Dyer (2018) maintain that adopting decolonising methodologies and Indigenous pedagogy in higher education and enabling programs prioritises Indigenous values and worldviews and contributes to positive change. As reported by Hearn and Kenna (2020) “levels of key performance indicators for Indigenous students - access, participation, success and completion (attainment) - remain below that of the overall domestic student population in most institutions” (p. 1). Early activism brought about government policies to strengthen participation in and educational outcomes for Indigenous peoples in higher education (Coates et al., 2020). The result was the creation of government funding provided for ‘enabling’ programs like the Murina Program across the country to address what has traditionally been problematic for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their aspirations to complete a higher degree program – access and equity.

In 2012 the Australian Government released the ‘Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Final Report July 2012’ known as the Behrendt Report (Behrendt et al., 2012). This report highlights the importance of Indigenising higher education curriculum to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and to strengthen educational opportunities as a means of improving their socio-economic status. The Murina enabling program continues to address high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by providing a culturally responsive program that engages students to explore educational opportunities to help them achieve success (Behrendt et al., 2012).

Craven et al. (2013) maintain that enabling programs seed success for strengthening participation of Indigenous students in higher education. However, Bookallil and Rolfe (2016) argue that this does not necessarily translate into enrolments in undergraduate studies, further claiming that there is limited evaluation of the effectiveness of enabling programs to support the goal of transition (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011). The Murina program challenges perceived definitions of success based on enrolment and transition outcomes; rather, the Murina program seeks to connect participants through fostering relationships and by sharing stories.

The University of Tasmania responded to the Behrendt Report (Behrendt et al., 2012) by developing a number of strategies intended to overcome the barriers to higher

education participation faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These strategies include the University of Tasmania Strategic Plan 2019-2024 (University of Tasmania, 2019) which drives place-based learning, that recognises the deep relationships with people and Country to increase the accessibility of higher education for Aboriginal people. Aligning with the findings of the Behrendt Report in 2017 the University of Tasmania released the Strategic Plan for Aboriginal Engagement (SPAE) 2017-2020 which "outlines the steps required to consolidate and reinvigorate, across all areas, the University's Aboriginal engagement" (University of Tasmania, 2017, p. 1). The 2021-2024 SPAE is being finalised and will be released soon.

## 2.2 Covid-19 and Aboriginal Higher Education in Australia and Tasmania

The pandemic has reinforced extant inequities in the higher education systems of many countries (Akuhata-Huntington et al., 2020; Butler-Henderson et al., 2021; Maddumapatabandi & Kelum 2020; UNESCO, 2020). At a recent online conference about online education in higher education during and beyond the pandemic, inequality of access to technology within ASEAN nations was a common theme (Australia-ASEAN Academics Forum, 2021).

The effect of the Novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) on individuals, societies and economies around the world has been profound and will continue to be so for decades to come. Education sectors around the world have been, and continue to be, deleteriously impacted by the social distancing requirements of combating the reproduction rates of the pandemic (Butler-Henderson et al., 2020). The effect of the pandemic on education and education systems has varied between countries and regions, and has changed over time, however, to illustrate some of the initial effect, according to Maddumapatabandi and Kelum (2020), some 1.3 billion students were impacted at the start of the pandemic (see also Pokhrel & Chetri, 2021).

There has been a concurrent explosion of literature related to the impacts of Covid-19 on higher education. One international consortium of academics has curated an open access Covid-19 Higher Education database, now in its second version (Butler-Henderson et al., 2021). One theme identified in the literature has been the potential ongoing impacts of the pandemic on higher education pedagogy. According to Mulrooney and Kelly (2020) "In the longer term, it is likely that much face-to-face teaching will be replaced with online provision" (p. 18), with Pham and Ho (2020) for example characterising a shift to online learning and teaching as a potential "new normal" in Vietnam (p. 1330).

Reedy (2019) maintains that "the educational inequity that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced in higher education in Australia is replicated in virtual learning spaces, with generic models of online learning design taking little account of cultural factors that impact on learning" (p. 132). Reedy (2019) also found that the key pedagogical imperatives of "making connections"

(p. 135) and "establishing relatedness" (p. 136) can be negatively impacted by an online learning environment. Whilst not specifically about Indigenous students and the impact of Covid-19 there are two projects that are worthy of note because of their relevance to digital learning in Aboriginal knowledges: Kinship Project (Mooney et al., 2017), and Virtual Tours on Country (Prehn et al., 2020).

Supported by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching, and foregrounding Indigenous stories and voices, the Kinship Project developed an existing module in cross-cultural learning, transferring this to the digital domain. The analysis of evaluative survey data of student experience of the module indicates that it was regarded as extremely effective as an online teaching tool. In Tasmania, Prehn et al. (2020) explored the use of video to support student learning in digital tours of Country. They conclude that these virtual tours were "received positively by students, evoke encouraging emotional responses towards Indigenous Lifeworlds, and are a resource-sensitive teaching tool to Indigenise curricula within tertiary education" (Prehn et al., p. 17).

In 2017 Universities Australia launched its Indigenous Strategy designed to improve Indigenous participation, engagement and experience in higher education (Universities Australia, 2017). Universities Australia published its third annual report of this strategy in March 2021, one of the themes of which was "Online education during the pandemic" (2021, p. 31). This report provides the only sector wide snapshot of the impact of Covid-19 on Australian Indigenous students. The Universities Australia report (2021) highlighted access issues for students, including to facilities and to internet and adequate bandwidth (p. 32), issues of feelings of isolation including 'restricted access to family and country" (p. 32) and issues with adapting to the online learning environment. These findings support the earlier research of Bennett et al. (2020) into the impact of Covid-19 on Indigenous students in Western Australian universities. They highlight the impact of layers of disadvantage when multiplied by Covid-19 stating that "the pre-existing digital divide in Australia creates challenges for Indigenous university students, in addition to those faced by all university students coping with the transition to online learning in a context of social isolation" (Bennett et al., 2020), n.p.). They also highlight the impact of Covid-19 on cultural and digital isolation, including being "cut off from extended family, community, and Country" and "inequitable access to the full range of digital infrastructure required for effective online learning" (Bennett, Uink and Cross, 2020, np). The authors argue that "Indigenous university students are at risk of experiencing multiple, intersecting and cumulative forms of isolation in the forced migration to online learning, due to COVID-19" (Bennett et al., n.p.).

## 3. Methods and methodology

This research has evolved over time as author 1 has explored her post graduate research journey and engaged with author 2 in this space. The research is a first step by author 1 into the publication space and to setting the parameters and tenor of her research. This has not been a short journey however,

as author 1 has for some time negotiated the liminal spaces between Aboriginal epistemologies and western, white, colonial attitudes. In this regard this research represents a signpost on a lifetime journey for author 1.

Broadly speaking this research employs a qualitative, ethnographic methodology (Creswell, 2014, Sarantakos, 2013) to learning and teaching in tertiary Aboriginal education in one Australian state. From this point of view, it represents a contribution to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). However, it is, likewise, an autoethnographic excursion for author 1, being grounded in her own narrative of being and becoming. For both authors this research is representative of a collaborative and respectful journey in SoTL focussed on the pedagogical imperatives in the Murina program that drove student learning during the pandemic.

The methods employed in this research have likewise evolved in response to changing post graduate research imperatives. The three data collection tools employed were: enrolment data, survey and student work samples. Due to the evolutionary nature of the research, approval for the use of data for this article was done retrospectively and informed by guidance provided by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Sciences) at the University of Tasmania. In May 2021, the researchers sought guidance as to the use of past formal institutional feedback surveys for this research - known institutionally as eVALUate surveys. These surveys are institution-wide and are anonymous. The analysis and reporting of these survey data deliberately de-identified any potentially identifying material by presenting a 'summary' of findings under a series of thematically devised headings. Some de-identified qualitative survey data was also used. The use of student work samples involved the researchers approaching individual Murina program students to request ethical clearance to use de-identified examples of their work. The requests for such permission were likewise informed by guidance provided by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Sciences) at the University of Tasmania.

Enrolment data were analysed by assembling enrolment statistics over time and calculating averages across time. Survey data were analysed thematically, and in a loosely inductive manner. The themes were refined and developed over a period of time in which the researchers sought linguistic and semantic meanings from short, qualitative survey extracts, an approach loosely informed by the thematic, inductive approach valorised by Braun and Clarke (2006). Over time this process resulted in a set of reliable themes for discussion. Analysis of student work samples employed an iterative process between the researchers shared by Jacobs and French (2021), which enabled 'close readings of artworks based on their individual qualities' (p. 6). This analysis responded to the question 'what do these images reveal about individual connections to Country?'

#### 4. Analysis and discussion

This section presents an analysis and discussion of data in three sections: 1). enrolment data, 2). feedback surveys, 3) and student work samples.

#### 4.1 Enrolment data

This section provides a brief analysis of enrolment data pre and post 2020 to examine the potential impact of the Global pandemic on Murina students in 2020. Between 1999 and 2019, 495 students have enrolled in the Murina program (n=495/21) over this time (an average yearly enrolment of 24 students). More recently and under the current program structure between 2017 and 2019, 124 (n=124/3) students enrolled in the Murina Program (an average yearly enrolment of 41 students). It must be noted that many students from the 2017-2019 data did not commence beyond their initial enrolment, so this data doesn't necessarily accurately reflect the number of students who actively engaged and further investigation is needed to understand why some students show initial interest in the program but do not progress.

In 2020, 38 students enrolled and engaged in the Murina Program for semester one, which is above the average enrolment of 23 students over the past 21 years and equal to recent average enrolments between 2017 and 2019 showing a consistency of engagement. Analysing enrolment data for semester two to examine potential Covid-19 impacts, revealed 20 students continued their studies into semester two in 2020 resulting in a retention rate of 53% (n=20/38). This means 18 students withdrew before semester two resulting in an attrition rate of 47% (n=18/38).

Anecdotal evidence collected by the Riawunna team to analyse this decline in enrolments suggests that 13% (n=5/38) of students withdrew due to direct impacts of Covid-19 relating to either limited technology capacity or home environments not conducive to online study despite various Riawunna interventions. Another 13% (n=5/38) of students transitioned into further UTAS studies in semester two. The third anecdotal attrition factor suggests 21% (n=8/38) of Murina students withdrew for pre-existing personal reasons before Covid-19 and therefore were not considered as Covid-19 impacted in this data analysis.

Table 3: Retention and attrition rates of Murina students semester two, 2020.

Enrolment Data	Percentage
Retention	53%
Attrition	47%
<b>Anecdotal Attrition sub-factors</b>	
-CoVID impact	13%
-Transition to further studies	13%
-Personal factors	21%

#### 4.2 Student surveys

At the completion of a unit of study at UTAS students are invited to complete surveys on their experience of both the unit and the teaching (known institutionally as eVALUate). This provides students with the opportunity to provide feedback about their experiences, to help measure the level of satisfaction with the unit, and to provide feedback to teachers. Over the six units delivered in the Murina Program

in 2020, a total of 101 requests for student feedback were sent to students with a total of 47 students responding for a response rate of 47% (n=47/101). Survey items scoped student experience of workload, unit learning outcomes, assessment items and others (Likert style) and general feedback through open-ended response opportunities.

In order to measure the difference between pre-Covid-19 and during Covid-19 learning experiences, the agreement of eVALUate items for the Murina program for 2019 and 2020 were analysed. In 2019 the overall agreement to survey items was 99.5% and in 2020 dropped slightly to 94.45% possibly suggesting some Covid-19 impact on student satisfaction, but still indicating a very high level of respondent satisfaction. This level of agreement by Murina program respondents was higher than the institutional average for both years indicating strong student satisfaction. One of the survey items asks "My learning in this unit was effectively supported by technology", for which Murina program responses in 2019 produced a 96.96% agreement, and in 2020 a 92.76% agreement. This small decline again possibly suggests an impact on student satisfaction due to Covid-19, but still indicating a very high level of satisfaction in this area.

An analysis was also undertaken of the open-ended eVALUate data for the six units delivered in the Murina Program for Semesters one and two, 2020. Sixty nine such responses were extracted and analysed where two broad themes emerged: "engagement strategies" and "Aboriginal pedagogy". These were further analysed, resulting in four sub-themes one in engagement strategies and three in Aboriginal pedagogy. Table 4 presents these four themes as either positive or constructive (an area for improvement) in nature.

Table 4: Four quantitative themes.

Theme	Positive	constructive	N=	Percentage
Support	21	3	24	35
Peer collaboration	7	0	7	10
Aboriginal knowledges	16	2	18	26
Curriculum impact	15	5	20	29
		Total	69	100

#### 4.2.1 Engagement strategies: Support

The support provided by Riawunna staff to assist students to overcome the challenges of Covid-19, accounted for 35% (n=25/69) of the open-ended survey responses. As such this was the most numerous feedback provided. Comments such as, "I feel strongly the staff at Riawunna have adapted to covid restrictions and have successfully delivered the courses through online platforms", to "considering we all had to change to online learning, I honestly think the learning outcomes are still great, we all had access to online tutors if needed". One response reinforced the importance of the critical supports provided by the Riawunna team and programs stating that "support is in place for those that need it and the course is flexible for all". Some comments expressed concerns about health and wellbeing such as "I

feel that things are going OK as long as we all stay safe", to "over the last three months it has been hard for all of us with the virus around and making sure we all stay healthy and safe".

#### 4.2.1 Aboriginal Pedagogy: Peer collaboration

Ten percent (n=7/69) of feedback related to the importance of peer connections and collaboration. Opportunities were provided for students to engage with each other in online break out groups, group activities and through the assessments encouraging peer discussion and collaboration. Comments such as, "it has been important to connect with people over this time in lock down", and "the collaboration with peers during this course has been very fruitful and a real positive experienced [sic.] for me personally" indicated the importance of building and maintaining connections with peers as a buffer to the isolation periods of Covid-19 in 2020.

#### 4.2.3 Aboriginal Pedagogy: Aboriginal knowledges

Twenty six percent (n=18/69) of comments relating to the pedagogy of the Murina Program focussed on the inclusion of Aboriginal knowledges through the process of storytelling and the sharing by elders and Aboriginal knowledge holders. Sixteen of these comments related to the positive impacts of this approach including, "loved the focus on Aboriginal storytellers, what a great concept for a unit", "the culturally appropriate content made this unit very interesting and motivating", alongside "a great way to actively practise my culture and learn how to present". Some comments emphasised the importance of "On Country" experiences such as, "this course does lack from not having on country trips but that is not at the fault of the course", and "there is definitely the aspect of 'On Country' that this course requires, so hopefully it is a possibility for end of year", indicating the importance of face-to-face connection when sharing Aboriginal knowledges.

#### 4.2.4 Aboriginal Pedagogy: Curriculum impact

Murina's teaching and learning design and delivery accounted for 29% (n=20/69) of the open-ended feedback. Fifteen of these comments suggested that the curriculum was interesting and engaging as demonstrated by the following comments, "I like the way the content flowed from one assignment to the next", "the content and information gained from all aspects of the unit are helpful", and further emphasised by "what we had was excellent, but I felt myself wanting a bit more", which also indicated the need by some students to be challenged and extended further. Five comments offered constructive feedback such as, "though I appreciated the flexibility surrounding the mini exhibition, I felt like it took up a bit too much of our class time", and "not to be openly negative or allowing students to be, about non-indigenous people", which highlighted the challenging discourse in the program for some students.

### 4.3 Student work samples

Students produced visually stunning assessments using technology to effectively engage peers and invited guests who joined classes through web conferencing. Students developed story maps, story plans and presented the achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander storytellers through samples of song, art, film and writing. They gathered stories, voiced their position on contemporary issues impacting the community and shared how they 'Connect to Country' visually using Microsoft Power Point and other creative mediums as they took turns to present virtually in class. Themes evident in these presentations explored the impacts of invasion and colonisation on people and place, the importance of preserving stories and honouring the 'game changers' that advanced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination.

Analysis of student work samples employed an iterative process between the researchers shared by Jacobs and French (2021), which enabled 'close readings of artworks based on their individual qualities' (p. 6). Student names have been replaced with pseudonyms throughout.

Figure 1 was created by Tania in response to the Connection to Country assessment. Tania created this original colourful map of Lutruwita (Tasmania) with tribal boundaries and cultural symbols using an earthy yet vibrant palette of acrylic paint and digital media. This work highlights Tania's knowledge of tribal boundaries, a care for Country and a careful use of cultural symbols including an original border.

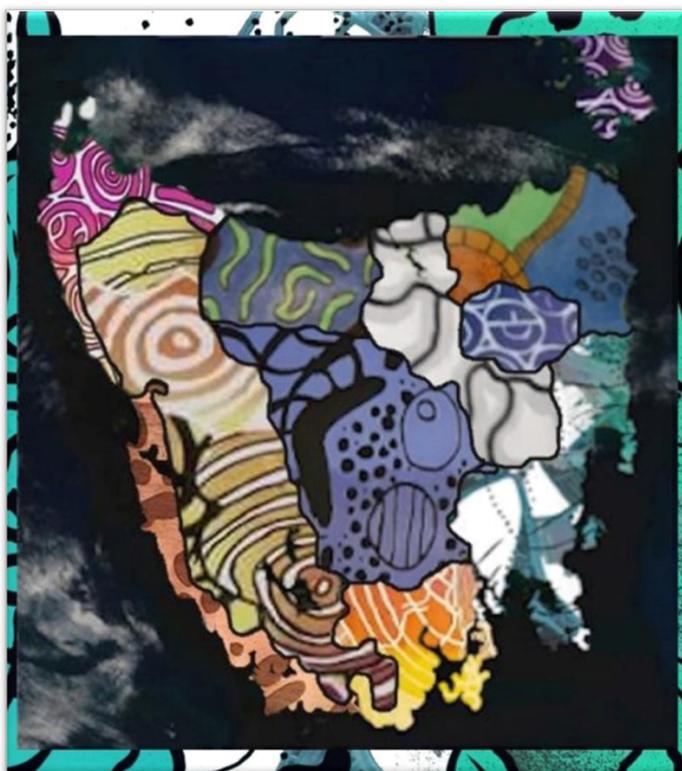


Figure 1. Map of lutruwita. Mixed Media. Tania.

Demonstrating her response to criterion two, 'describe connections of country today and its' continuing cultural practises' Tania expresses her personal connection to Country in contemporary times (Figure 2). Tania uses original mono prints, selecting earthy yet vibrant colours of green and ochre orange. These stunning works demonstrate the power of Tania's art practise and how it supports her cultural healing through art. Tania chose to highlight this by titling the work as she has. Again Tania uses symbols and shapes, this time from nature, to demonstrate her strong connection to and understanding of Country. These works provided Tania's peers with a powerful and inspiring narrative, revealing a window into Tania's identity as a Pakana woman and her relationship with Country today.



Figure 2. Connections to Trumanyapayna Country. Mono print, ink on paper. Tania.

In Figure 3 Hilary combines digital photographs with text to recall and reflect upon her "On Country" trip to Yingina, the Great Lakes in central Lutruwita. In the text Hilary describes the impact of this visit as "opening my eyes to a number of ways that knowledge could be delivered". Hilary shares her images of the vast and expansive country of 'Yingina' alongside the lake that laps upon 'Yingina's' soil, where ancient stone tools of thousands of years lay. Students walked on Country, picking up and identifying tools as Aboriginal Heritage Officers and community members shared their significance. This trip was in hindsight an extra special experience for students and staff as it was the last time everyone came together on "On Country" before Covid-19 restrictions were imposed.



Figure 3. "On Country" trip to 'Yingina'. Digital photographs and text. Hilary.

Figure 4 is a screen shot from a ten-minute pre-recorded video presentation by Danny in response to the 'Connection to Country' assessment task. In this presentation Danny shared with his Murina Program peers his 'Connection to Country'. Danny's Country is on the Bass Strait Islands (as seen in Figure 4). During his presentation Danny shared a heartfelt narrative that described the importance of family and ancestors that had shaped who he is today as a Pakana man. His presentation took students on a journey back to Country using a range of contemporary family photographs on Flinders Island, walking Country and sharing stories. Danny shared images of his ancestors connecting to 'Salt Water Country', including their boat making and sailing practices.

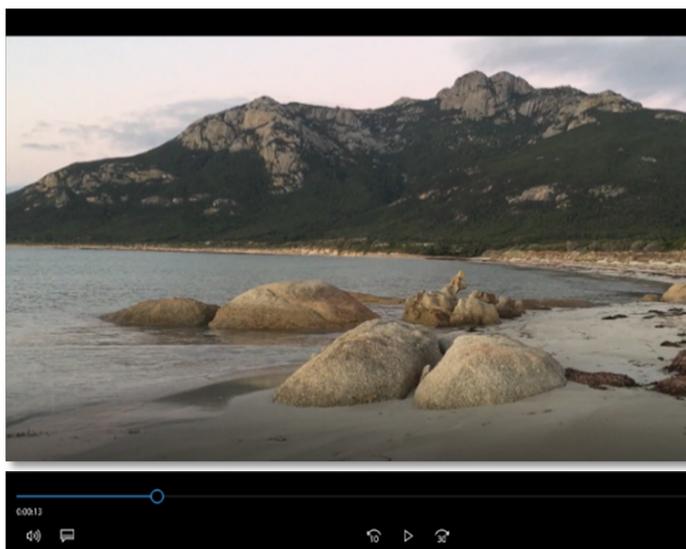


Figure 4. Connection to the 'Islands'. Digital image (screen shot). Danny.

Figure 5 is another strong student work sample from the 'Connection to Country' assessment task. Through her presentation Erica described her "Connection to Country" at Larapuna on the east coast of Tasmania as deep and meaningful. Erica presented live to students an inspiring yarn on how her 'Old People' lived on 'Country' before invasion, including her ancestor Mannerlagenna who is an important and significant figure and ancestor for many Pakana people. Erica shared how she spends time on 'Country' with family today and the importance of deepening these connections.

Figure 6 is a screen shot from a Microsoft Power Point slide, including original artwork of an 'old style' record, developed by Lisa as part of a kani sharing. Lisa's live presentation celebrated and honoured 'Islander' musicians the Brown Boys, who were from Cape Barren Island, in the early to mid 1900's. Using both visual stimulus and audio, Lisa embedded a musical example in the slide, transporting students back in time. The Brown Boys performed using a unique fusion of folk and Celtic instruments, including violins and guitar. Their music expresses their sealer ancestors and the self-taught musical talents of Tasmanian Aboriginal "Islanders". Lisa designed the gold record and plaque to honour the Brown Boys describing their achievements and



Figure 5. Connecting to Larapuna. Digital photographs in screen shot. Erica.

their influential legacy that continues through the lives of proud "Islanders" today.

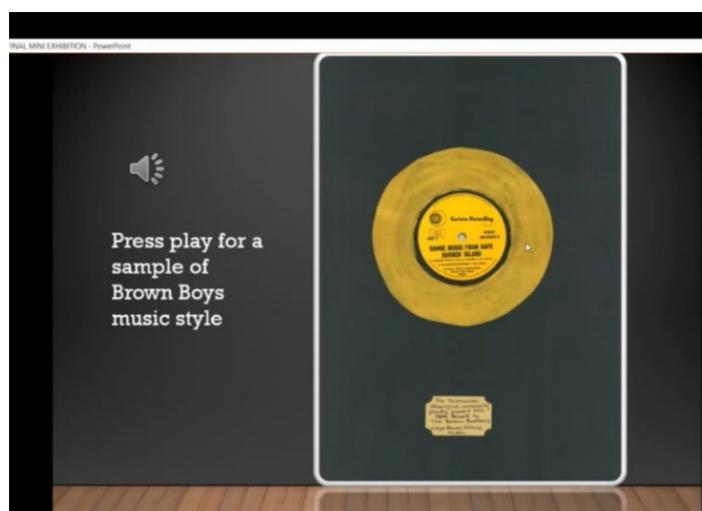


Figure 6. The Brown Boys Music. Original art work on PowerPoint screen shot. Lisa.

## 5. Key findings and recommendations

### 5.1 Key findings

This article examined Riawunna's Murina Program pedagogy during Covid-19 and how students in the UTAS Murina program navigated this upheaval and how this impacted their learning experiences in 2020. Three data sets were analysed and discussed: 1). enrolment data, 2). student experience surveys, and 3). student work samples. This section highlights the importance of these findings, acknowledges the limitations of the research, and suggests areas for further research.

According to anecdotal evidence out of the 38 students who enrolled and actively engaged in the Murina Program for semester one 2020, only 13% (n=5/38) of students were directly impacted by Covid-19 to the point that they withdrew from the course by semester two. This data analysis also revealed that 23% (n=9/38) of 2020 Murina students have transitioned into further UTAS studies in 2021. This is a positive outcome and contrary to the tide of evidence that highlights the impact of layers of disadvantage when multiplied by Covid-19 (Bennett et al., 2020).

The analysis of student experience surveys revealed a very high level of agreement responses exceeding the average institutional responses, indicating strong engagement and high satisfaction with the Murina program learning experiences. Furthermore, de-identified, open-ended responses revealed two main themes of importance to respondents: 1). engagement strategies, and 2). Aboriginal pedagogy. These were expressed as four sub-themes. 'Support' by Riawunna staff at 35% (n=24/69) was highly valued as a critical means to help students overcome the challenges of the pandemic in 2020. Riawunna staff, both Academic and Professional, also delivered important programs such as the Riawunna Tutoring Program and the Riawunna Financial Hardship Scheme to provide wrap around support. This feedback emphasised the importance of student-teacher relationships (Hall, 2015) to strengthen student engagement and resilience during isolation. These relationships are supported by the literature around online learning (Reedy, 2019) and were critical in overcoming some of the potential barriers caused by isolation through online learning as highlighted by the Universities Australia report (2021) and the work of Bennett, Uink and Cross (2020).

The data analysis also revealed that students equally valued the engagement and sharing of Aboriginal knowledge holders at 26% (n=18/69) and the impact of the curriculum at 29% (n=20/69) to enrich learning, a finding supported by literature on strengthening connections through the sharing of stories and yarns (Andersen, 2017; Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Yunkaporta & Kirby 2011) and creating a pedagogy that Centres Aboriginal student's voices using decolonising approaches (Leroy-Dyer, 2018; Biermann & Townsen-Cross, 2008). The three themes of: 1). sharing Aboriginal knowledges, 2). curriculum impact, and 3). peer collaboration are entwined and when combined are at the heart of Murina's Aboriginal pedagogy making up 65% (n=45/69) of survey responses.

Finally the student work samples provided data that expressed participants' lived experiences of learning and teaching in the pandemic, and of Aboriginal knowledges, reflecting the value of the two-way pedagogy of the Murina Program (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Biermann & Townsen-Cross, 2008; Hall, 2015; Leroy-Dyer, 2018; Martin, 2014; Nakata, 2007; Ober, 2004; Purdie et al., 2011) intended to give voice to and to honour Pakana people and the lands of Lutruwita. This was evident in the assessments that invited students to share their Connections to Country using a wide selection of media and creative mediums to communicate their experiences, whilst preparing students for further tertiary studies as they operated at the cultural interface (Bat et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2017; Nakata, 2007; Ober, 2004) to strengthen their learning experiences and transition into further educational pathways.

### 5.2 Limitations and recommendations for future research

The authors acknowledge the main limitation of this research, being that data sources were limited. However, having said this, the cohort for any given year of the Murina program is similarly small. To overcome this limitation the authors received ethical approval to access data from a number of different sources. The analysis of these data has provided Author 1 with research findings that will frame her ongoing graduate research, and through this article, contribute to this important research area.

Whilst findings are consistent with existing literature this research has highlighted the need for further research into Indigenous enabling programs as supported by Bookallie and Ralph (2016). Further research to address a gap in knowledge regarding program effectiveness particularly in connection to early withdrawals, program impact and transition from enabling programs into further studies would be of particular value (Craven et al., 2013; Lomax-Smith et al., 2011). However, such research needs to move beyond enrolment data alone to understand and give voice to the students around the value and impact of enabling programs to understand their meaning of success.

Enabling program retention and transition data alone can present a distorted view of the value of such programs to higher education and more importantly to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly when socio-economic factors such as those identified in the Behrendt report (2012) have such an impact on student learning. Research that focusses on student experience and that explores the reasons why Indigenous students choose to set foot in the door of an education system that has previously denied their existence, will place their voices at the centre of such research and empower them to become their own agents of change (Hall, 2015; Leroy-Dyer, 2018; Ober, 2004).

### Glossary of terms

Some terms used in this paper use palawa kani, which means 'Tasmanian Aborigines speak', the language of Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

Pakana = Tasmanian Aboriginal person  
Lutruwita = Tasmania  
tunapri = to know  
milaythina = Country  
kani = To talk

Aboriginal Programs at the University of Tasmania in the 1990's used Plomely's (1976) word list and chose Murina for 'path' (p. 373) and Riawunna for 'circle' (p.183).

In this article 'Indigenous' is sometimes exchanged with the terms Pakana, Aboriginal or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander as the preferred terms in Lutruwita.

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