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To cite this article: Melissa Fong-Emmerson, Claire Lambert, Braden Hill & Maria M. Ryan (05 May 2026): Understanding the journey to higher education: decision-making insights from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Higher Education Research & Development, DOI: [10.1080/07294360.2026.2660994](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2026.2660994)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2026.2660994>



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# Understanding the journey to higher education: decision-making insights from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the decision-making process of Indigenous Australian students in pursuing higher education, addressing a gap in understanding their educational choices. It identifies the key factors influencing university enrolment decisions and how these shape students' educational pathways. Using a narrative-inquiry approach, the study explored the lived experiences of Indigenous students from two Western Australian universities. Through written autobiographies, yarning sessions and one-on-one interviews, participants shared rich, nuanced insights into their journeys to higher education. Findings reveal the pivotal role of 'sparks' in normalising higher education as a viable option. Students relied minimally on formal information search, depending heavily on trusted reference groups and institutional choice was guided by a set of key attributes. This study presents an adapted consumer decision-making framework grounded in Indigenous worldviews and highlights the need for tailored, culturally responsive marketing strategies. By centring Indigenous voices and adopting a strength-based approach, this research advances theoretical understanding and offers practical solutions to increase Indigenous student access, participation and equity in higher education.

## ARTICLE HISTORY


Received 24 February 2025  
Accepted 25 March 2026


## KEYWORDS

Indigenous consumer decision-making process; consumer journey; higher education; narrative inquiry; inclusion

## Introduction

Universities Australia (2022) is dedicated to improving higher education (HE) outcomes for Indigenous peoples, focusing on increasing completion rates, expanding careers and embedding Indigenous knowledges into teaching and research. However, achieving these goals remain challenging in a sector predominantly shaped by non-Indigenous leadership, cultural norms and commercial pressures. Persistent inequities in enrolment and

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2026.2660994>.

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access stem from structural inequalities in education systems (Song et al., 2014), financial barriers, cultural safety concerns, and inconsistent equity, diversity, and inclusion support (Callaghan, 2024; Harpur et al., 2024). Increasing Indigenous student participation in HE requires marketing strategies that genuinely resonate with prospective Indigenous students, grounded in a nuanced understanding of their decision-making processes (e.g., Pechenkina, 2015; Universities Australia, 2022). While traditional five-stage consumer decision-making process (CDMP) models (Engel et al., 1968; Kotler & Armstrong, 2016) have long informed understandings of consumer behaviour, across cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions, contemporary HE research highlights important limitations in their application to this context. Towers and Towers (2020) demonstrate that postgraduate course choice follows a non-linear, iterative path influenced by digital touchpoints, emotional fit and identity. Similarly, Gai et al. (2016) emphasise the central role of peer forums in international student decision-making, while Dirin et al. (2021) highlight how social bonding through online networks shapes HE choices. McNicholas and Marcella (2024) add that for many international postgraduate students, the decision-making process is cyclical and culturally shaped rather than strictly rational. These models, and the disciplines they emerge from, are rooted in Western epistemologies (Bray, 2008) and often fail to adequately capture Indigenous perspectives, leaving critical gaps in understanding their decision-making processes (Peredo & McLean, 2013). Despite the significance of this issue, research on CDMP frameworks that centre Indigenous voices and experiences within HE remains scarce. Thus, while traditional models remain relevant, their linear assumptions overlook the complex, relational and culturally situated nature of decision-making in contemporary and non-Western HE contexts.

Erasmus et al. (2014) argue that a 'one size fits all' approach is ineffective in relationship-oriented HE markets, highlighting the need for strategies that reflect diverse cultural contexts, including those of Indigenous students. As HE adopts a market-driven model, students increasingly function as active consumers, prompting institutions to implement strategies to influence decisions and stay competitive (Casidy, 2014).

Since education services cannot typically be sampled in advance, early experiences in the decision journey play a critical role in shaping perceptions and choices (Poole et al., 2023). Shao et al. (2009) and Synnot et al. (2022) stress the importance of recognising consumer diversity, as a single approach cannot effectively address varied needs. While some research has examined CDMP and the influence of Indigenous products and cultural values (Groves, 1999), a significant gap persists in consumer behaviour research from an Indigenous perspective (Raciti, 2016), particularly in HE decision-making.

The urgent need for equity-driven research in HE and marketing is evident in the absence of culturally responsive and effective approaches for underrepresented groups, further perpetuating gaps in understanding and engagement (Geritz & Raciti, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires research beyond theory to deliver practical solutions. Heffernan (2022), in a 40-year review of social justice research published in *Higher Education Research & Development*, calls for systemic changes to dismantle privilege-based barriers and create inclusive pathways for marginalised groups. This reinforces the necessity of developing frameworks that acknowledge Indigenous

perspectives and inform institutional strategies fostering genuine inclusion and equity in HE (Raciti, 2022).

Aligned with the *Universities Accord* (O’Kane et al., 2024) and *Universities Australia’s Indigenous Strategy* (Universities Australia, 2022), this research advocates for an inclusive marketing approach to increase Indigenous participation in HE. Grounded in social constructivist (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and Indigenous standpoint theory (Nakata, 2007), it examines Indigenous decision-making through the CDMP (Engel et al., 1968) and consumer decision journey (Court et al., 2009). Building on HE-specific studies such as Towers and Towers (2020), it examines whether Indigenous students’ journey reflects, resists or reshapes these models. It responds to calls for a deeper understanding of the factors influencing Indigenous students’ choices (e.g., Craven et al., 2016) and marketing’s role in attracting them to HE (Barney, 2022). It cautions that neglecting Indigenous perspectives risks perpetuating systemic inequities and undermining self-determination (Callaghan, 2024).

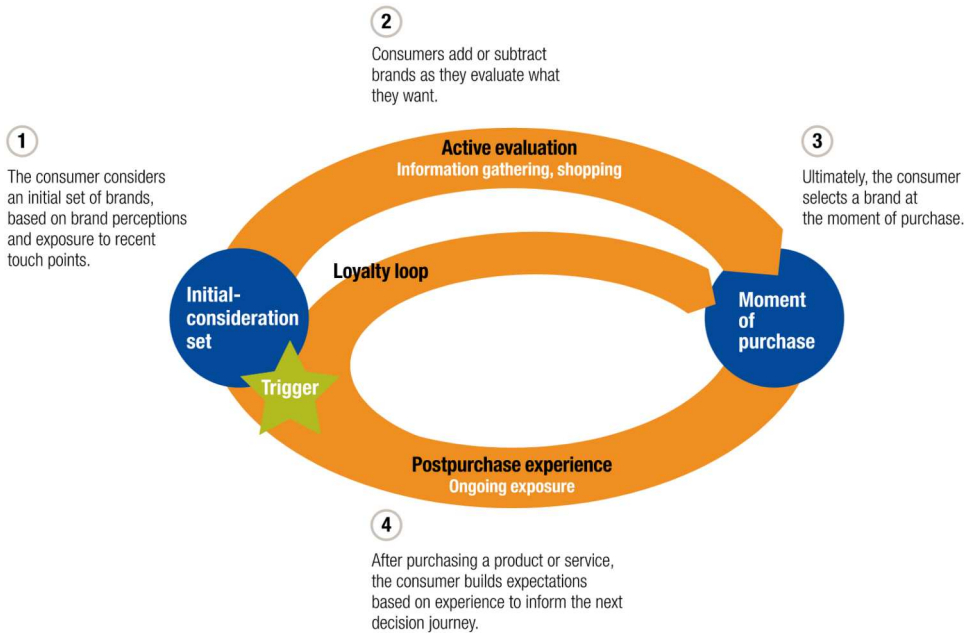
This study explores two key questions: (1) What is the decision-making journey of Indigenous students enrolling in HE? (2) What are the key factors influencing this journey? Adopting the narrative inquiry approach used by Hill et al. (2023), the study focuses on two Western Australian (WA) universities with active Indigenous student enrolments.

## Background

The CDMP, introduced by John Dewey (1910) and refined by Nicosia (1966), Engel et al. (1968), and Howard and Sheth (1969), has shaped understandings of consumer behaviour. Engel et al. (1968) further developed the five-stage model, which has since become a widely adopted framework among marketing scholars and practitioners (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016). However, the model has been critiqued for its predominantly rational orientation, with scholars calling for more context-specific frameworks (Stankevich, 2017). To address this, research has expanded to include psychological, sociocultural, and situational factors, including peer and family expectations, cultural identity, geographic location and financial constraints. This shift recognises decision-making as a spectrum of involvement, from routine behaviour to complex problem-solving (Dirin et al., 2021; Leonov et al., 2023; McNicholas & Marcella, 2022).

A key evolution is McKinsey’s consumer decision journey (Court et al., 2009), which reconceptualises the linear five-stage model as a four-phase circular framework: initial consideration, active evaluation, purchase and post-purchase experience (see Figure 1). This approach reflects contemporary multi-channel landscape, where consumers engage continuously through digital and social touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Viridi et al., 2020).

Building on this, Towers and Towers (2020) emphasise the iterative nature of HE decision-making, where consideration sets expand and contract over time, influenced by rational and emotional factors. This highlights the influence of social networks, peer interactions and digital engagement, adding nuance beyond McKinsey’s focus (Dirin et al., 2021). Similarly, McNicholas and Marchella (2024) show that international postgraduate students’ decision journeys are influenced by cultural context and group dynamics rather than purely rational standards.



**Figure 1.** Source: Court et al. (2009) Exhibit from “The consumer decision journey,” 2009, McKinsey Quarterly, [www.mckinsey.com](http://www.mckinsey.com). Copyright (c) 2026 McKinsey & Company. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

These insights are crucial, as HE represents a high-involvement decision involving extensive research and personal risk (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016). While studies examined customer value (Woodall et al., 2014), university branding (Stephenson et al., 2016) and iterative decision-making (Towers & Towers, 2022), applications of consumer models to Indigenous HE contexts remain limited. Although cultural differences in decision-making are acknowledged (Leo et al., 2005), research on Indigenous Australian students’ decision-making is scarce.

This gap is significant. Both the five-stage CDMP and McKinsey’s decision journey have been critiqued for their Western-centric orientation, the former for overly rational assumptions and the latter for overemphasising purchase over loyalty. Within HE, engagement and touchpoints remain underexplored (Lemon & Verhouf, 2016; Towers & Towers, 2020). Moreover, alignment with Indigenous values, which emphasise community, cultural identity and collective well-being, requires critical examination (Smith et al., 2023; Woollorton, 2023). Addressing this gap aligns with sector priorities. The Universities Accord (O’Kane et al., 2024) calls for an increase in Indigenous graduates and leaders, while the Indigenous Strategy 2022–2025 (Universities Australia, 2022) seeks to close participation gaps. Strength-based approaches centred on Indigenous voices (Lambert et al., 2024) and Raciti’s (2022) call for inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in marketing emphasise the need to decolonise research. Accordingly, this study collaborates with Indigenous communities and adopts Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Nakata, 2007) to challenge marginalisation in mainstream research and offer a more inclusive lens on HE decision-making.

## Positionality statement

It is essential to acknowledge the research team's positionality, as researchers' perspectives, experiences and identities shape the study's approach and outcomes. The lead researcher is a non-Indigenous woman of colour with cultural connections to the broader Peranakan community. This study was conducted with a Noongar (Wardandi) researcher and with the support of Indigenous centres. In addition, two researchers are white, Australian-born academics engaged in decolonising research practices. The study design prioritises Indigenous voices, values and needs, ensuring a respectful and ethical approach. All researchers engage in ongoing self-reflection and education to understand positionality and potential bias, guided by decolonising perspectives and the insights of those with lived experiences different from their own.

## Method

### *Narrative inquiry*

A narrative inquiry approach (Cheung & Nieminen, 2025; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) explored Indigenous students' journey to HE. In this approach, stories serve as both a method and a phenomenon (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007), capturing individual complexities while integrating Indigenous epistemologies, shedding light on autonomy, colonisation, and historical context (Kramp, 2004). Written narratives, yarning circles and interviews were framed using prompts informed by existing literature on decision-making journeys (Court et al., 2009; Engel et al., 1968; Towers & Towers, 2020), while allowing participants' stories to emerge organically. Yarning was conducted in three interconnected forms: social yarning to establish trust and cultural safety; research topic yarning to explore journeys to HE, and collaborative yarning to support shared reflection and meaning-making (Shay, 2019). This approach aligned with Indigenous knowledge-sharing practices and adhered to established yarning methodologies (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies code of ethics (AIATSIS, 2022). To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to apply narrative inquiry within a CDMP framework to explore Indigenous students' pathways to HE.

Following ethics approval, participants received an information letter and provided informed consent. Participants shared written narratives of up to 500 words reflecting on their journeys to HE, including influences, motivations, aspirations, challenges and supports. A three-phase narrative inquiry approach (Hill et al., 2023) was implemented (see Table 1). Data were collected by the lead researcher and an Indigenous facilitator from the university's Indigenous Centre, supporting culturally grounded methods. Potential power dynamics were mitigated through voluntary participation and self-selection into later phases. None of the researchers held direct teaching or assessment roles during the interview phase.

Participation in Phase 2 and 3 was self-selected. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, indicated by the completeness of individual narratives (Wang & Geale, 2015). In narrative inquiry, saturation focuses on deeply understanding each participant's story, not just identifying new themes (Saunders et al., 2018). Van Manen et al. (2016) emphasised that interpretive phenomenological analysis aims for

**Table 1.** Narrative inquiry three-phases.

Phase	Details
Phase 1	Demographic details and up to 500-word written narratives were collected via a Qualtrics survey from participants (n = 37) with the aim for participants to reflect before Phase 2.
Phase 2	Three focus groups (60-90 min, N = 15) were conducted to expand on key themes from Phase One. Participants were prompted on their decision-making stages. Conversations were guided by yarning principles, allowing themes to surface naturally through mutual dialogue and aligning with Indigenous research approaches (Hill et al., 2023).
Phase 3	Participants (n = 6) whose stories needed further clarity were invited to a follow-up one-on-one narrative interview (30–60 min). These were used to deepen or clarify emerging themes. The interviews followed a four-phase process: a broad prompt, the participant's uninterrupted narrative, a questioning phase, and a concluding discussion (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000).

complete, rich personal accounts rather than strict saturation. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A reflexive approach was used to thematically analyse participants' stories and identify common themes (Clarke & Braun, 2016). Multiple coders (the lead researcher, a senior Indigenous academic) independently coded in NVivo a subset of transcripts, then met to resolve differences, ensuring cultural and analytical rigour (Williams & Moser, 2019). Themes from the first phase were expanded through group dialogue, then refined in interviews, offering collective insights (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010).

## Sample

Given the small sub-cohort of Indigenous students, a purposive sampling method was employed. At the two Western Australian (WA) metropolitan universities where the research was conducted, Indigenous students represented 1.8% and 2.4% of domestic student cohorts respectively in 2023 (Department of Education, 2024), compared to 3.8% of the overall population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Narrative inquiry typically involves small sample sizes, with 1–25 participants recommended for in-depth analysis (Subedi, 2021). This study focused on 37 HE students, recruited with the support of the universities' Indigenous Centres via email and social media. Participants, all of whom were enrolled and identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, were assigned pseudonyms, and their Country affiliation (AIATSIS, 2022) was noted where available. Table 2 provides demographic data to contextualise the participants' narratives, offering insights to enhance interpretation and analysis. The proportion of participants skews toward younger first-in-family students, which offers valuable insights into transitional decision-making experiences.

All phases were co-facilitated with Indigenous staff, including yarning facilitators, ensuring cultural protocols, with reflexive journaling and debriefing with Indigenous colleagues supporting cultural safety and rigour. The research design and data analysis were co-

**Table 2.** Sample demographics.

Course enrolled	Age	Number of students
Indigenous-specific enabling course	18–24	20
Bachelor's degree	25–54	13
Enabling course	45–54	1
Postgraduate course	45–54	3

created and iteratively validated with senior Indigenous leaders and an Indigenous staff member involved in recruitment, ensuring findings remained culturally grounded and consistent with collective sense-making. In line with Indigenous Data Sovereignty, the AIATSIS Code of Ethics (2020) and CARE Principles (Collective benefit, Authority to control, Responsibility and Ethics), the stories and knowledge shared are stewarded by the Indigenous Centre, affirming custodianship, authority and collective benefit over individual gain.

### **Findings: insights from student narratives**

Findings are drawn from the full narrative accounts shared by participants across the three phases of the narrative inquiry. The analysis considers participants' stories as whole, situated accounts shaped by context, culture, and lived experience. Written narratives, yarning circles and interviews collectively informed the findings enabling continuity, nuance and meaning to be retained across participants' journeys. The survey revealed that 62.2% of participants were first-in-family, highlighting the challenges Indigenous communities face in accessing HE. This aligns with data from the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (2023), which points to disparities in participation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The findings emphasise the need for a 'whole-of-university' approach to improve inclusivity (Uink et al., 2019). Across participants narratives, four key insights emerged: the power of 'sparks' in recognising opportunities, minimal information search, considered evaluation of key attributes, and post-enrolment experience leading to advocacy and loyalty loops.

#### ***The power of 'sparks' leading to opportunity recognition***

Participants' journeys often began with 'sparks', moments of encouragement from trusted sources that normalised HE before a formal need arose. These experiences show the influence of consumer socialisation in shaping opportunity recognition. For example, Samantha traced her decision to study marine biology to a conversation at age twelve, Blake was inspired by school outreach visits, and Madison by a young man she cared for. Opportunity recognition is closely connected to these initial sparks, shaped by cultural, familial and community influences.

#### ***Minimal information search***

Participants conducted limited active searching, relying mainly on trusted reference groups to identify gaps between their current circumstances and desired goals (Stankevich, 2017). University websites and open days were used mainly to validate choices shaped by relational trust and the guidance from family, Indigenous Centres and school staff. This reliance on community-driven knowledge marks a distinctive pattern in Indigenous students' decision-making.

#### ***Evaluation of a core set of key attributes***

Participants were asked to describe the process or approach they used in evaluating which university and opportunities were best suited to them. Typically, consumers

**Table 3.** Core set of key attributes affirming purchase decisions.

Westernised attributes *	Overlapping attributes	Indigenous students' attributes in this study
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course offerings</li> <li>• Location/Accessibility</li> <li>• Teaching quality</li> <li>• University's reputation/ranking</li> <li>• Career prospects and employability</li> <li>• Individual achievement over community/culturally oriented considerations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course offerings</li> <li>• Location/Accessibility</li> <li>• Teaching quality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course offerings</li> <li>• Location/Accessibility</li> <li>• Teaching quality</li> <li>• Universities demonstrating authentic inclusion</li> <li>• Cultural and educational support</li> <li>• (e.g: alternate pathways, tutoring programmes, Indigenous-specific enabling programmes, flexible learning, cultural connection/sense of community)</li> <li>• Reputable Indigenous Centre</li> </ul>

\* (Hofstede, 2011; Walsh et al., 2015)

assess options based on attributes important to them, seeking the best perceived value (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016). Key attributes included authentic inclusion, cultural and educational support, and the reputation of the Indigenous centre (see Table 3).

Participants sought culturally inclusive, supportive universities that align with their passions and offer equitable admission pathways. They valued institutions that genuinely embrace diversity, creating spaces where all students feel welcomed, respected and supported regardless of race, gender, sexuality, disability, socioeconomic status or religion. Many participants emphasised the importance of flexible learning opportunities, Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Schemes and dedicated Indigenous student spaces and services. Indigenous Centres were seen as playing a pivotal role in fostering belonging and supporting academic success (Fredericks et al., 2024). For example, Blake rejected a university where he felt excluded, while Samantha and Madison emphasised the importance of Indigenous spaces. Participants called for authentic representation at all touchpoints, with attention to reputable Indigenous Centres, inclusivity, accessibility, location and course offerings. Communications should reflect multidimensional portrayals that resonate with Indigenous communities, demonstrating a commitment to respect and inclusion.

### *Evaluation of experience- potential advocacy and loyalty loop*

Post-enrolment reflections revealed high satisfaction, with participants becoming advocates for HE within their communities, exemplifying McKinsey's 'loyalty loop' (Court et al., 2009). Madison now encourages her cousins, Samantha expresses no regrets, and Blake reassures peers that *'no matter what background you're from, you can do it'*. This advocacy operates through word-of-mouth (WOM), which Towers and Towers (2020) identify as influential in shaping prospective students' choices. These accounts illustrate how positive university experiences reinforce collective aspirations, strengthen pathways for future students, and shift narratives from deficit-focused to strength-based, relational, and community-oriented models (Raciti, 2022).

### **Illustrative participant stories**

To complement the thematic findings presented above, three selected participant stories are presented here. The stories of Madison, Blake and Samantha reflect broader

participant journeys and provide rich illustrations of the lived experiences underpinning the key themes.

**Madison's story:** *'I realised that I'd been giving the young man I supported excuses out of fear of failing. After he passed away, I finally followed through on the promise I made to him and applied to university. I strive to be the best student I can be and give back to my community.'*

Madison, a Nyikina woman from the Kimberley region of WA, grew up in a remote area surrounded by family and Aboriginal communities. Raised by 'Aussie battlers' parents, she and her siblings learned independence from a young age. Reflecting on her schooling, Madison shared, *'I never really achieved anything ... I wasn't academically or athletically gifted in any way.'* She struggled with high school and often skipped classes. University seemed out of reach, both culturally and geographically. *'Not many people did ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) ... the idea was to get out of school, get a trade or in an office. University was only for smart people'*, she recalled, noting that limited support and her ADHD compounded these challenges. Leaving school at sixteen, she worked across Australia and eventually entered the mental health sector. Madison also supports children in her community as a foster carer, sharing her experience and guiding them through the education system. She explains: *'Learning can be flexible and not just from a textbook'*.

Her inspiration to study psychology began from a conversation with a young man she supported. *'I mentioned to him how I would love to study psychology ... However, I was scared I was not smart enough because of my past experiences at school. He continued to encourage me ... I realised that I was giving him excuses because I was afraid of failing.'* She also credits her sister, who encouraged her by saying there was no shame in trying and to 'give it a go'. Years later, Madison applied through an enabling programme and found a university that supported her learning. She emphasised the importance of a culturally safe space: *'It's not just tutoring and assignment help, it's the emotional and cultural support provided'*. The Aboriginal Tutoring Program helped her understand how she learns best, while dedicated Indigenous spaces and conversations with Indigenous staff offered invaluable cultural guidance. Flexible study options allowed Madison to balance her responsibilities as a parent, making university a normal part of life. *'I love bringing my kids on campus because I want them to see it's normal to go to university. I have also encouraged three other cousins to give uni a go'*. Now a second-year student, she aims to pursue a Master's in Clinical Psychology to support families affected by trauma and educational barriers.

**Blake's story:** *'I want to show people and myself that I can go to university and succeed. I want to break the chain of my family being poor and support my future family.'*

Blake, a full-time enabling programme student and part-time actor, was inspired to pursue HE through school outreach visits: *'... before that, it wasn't really uni; I was going to join the army, but university – they came, and it broadened my mind.'* The visit and hands-on activities gave Blake hope and motivation for a different future. These sparks helped him see new possibilities. Although some peers were discouraging, *'they were saying you shouldn't be doing this and that, just go to the mines,'* Blake's family played a pivotal role in supporting his journey. His father and friends, who had experienced difficult paths in their youth, encouraged him to choose differently. *'They were the*

ones that said, you should do this, you want to be a good kid. Even if they did bad stuff in the past, they are still very supportive. They would share with me how it led them down the wrong path.’ When evaluating universities, Blake chose one close to home and inclusive. An incident at another university left him disheartened: ‘... an old lady, who was working there, looked at us, looked again and then came out and said ... oh sorry only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.’ This made him feel unaccepted because of his skin colour. Now, Blake is motivated to inspire others: ‘... doesn’t matter where you’re from. Just keep pushing forward.’

**Samantha’s story: I was asked, ‘What do you want to be when you’re older?’**

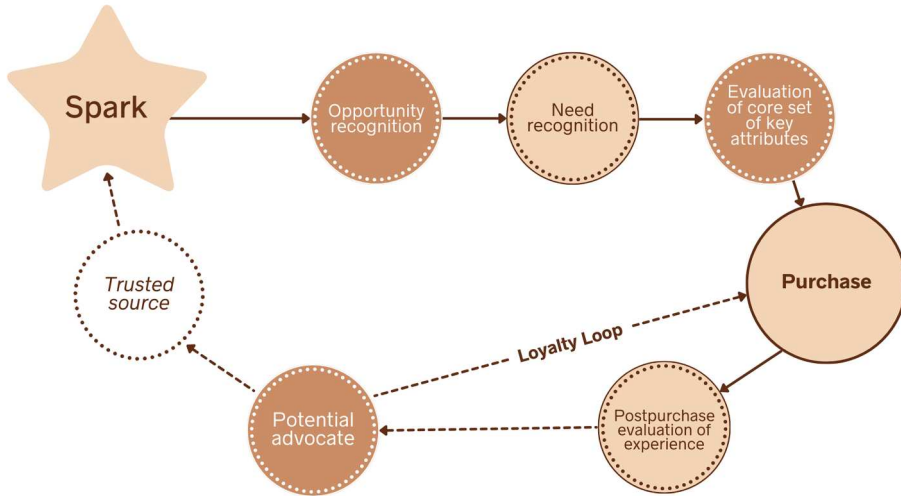
Samantha, a Ghungalu woman from Central Queensland, traces her decision to a spark in Year 6, when a family friend asked about her future goals. Their conversation about her love for animals led to marine biology, a goal she still pursues. In high school, Samantha embraced outreach opportunities such as the National Indigenous Business Summer School (NIBBSWA) hosted at X University: ‘I remember being around everyone at the Indigenous Centre. It was amazing ... you know ... where I don’t have to feel like ... keeping my guard up.’ These experiences nurtured her sense of belonging and revealed pathways into university beyond ATAR. When evaluating universities, Samantha chose X University for its strong Indigenous Centre, supportive environment, and welcoming community. Her decision was also inspired by her nan, who began studying Aboriginal health, making them the first in their family to attend university. Despite not finishing high school themselves, her parents encouraged Samantha to pursue education and opportunities they had not experienced. Teachers also motivated her to follow her passions. Reflecting on her journey, she expressed no regrets: ‘It is hard work being a full-time student, but I am ready to take on my degree.’ She draws strength from being around like-minded peers, further normalising her chosen pathway.

## Empirical framework

Figure 2 presents an empirical framework for prospective Indigenous students, grounded in the study’s findings. It integrates four key insights highlighted through distinct visual cues, including bolded text and a shaded star. Unlike the traditional linear model that starts with ‘need recognition’, this framework begins with the power of a ‘spark’, typically a conversation with trusted individuals that normalises the idea of attending university. Sparks are positioned as a distinct stage rather than a precursor to problem recognition, as they occur before conscious awareness of need and reflect Indigenous students’ relational community-driven motivations. Through this process, many participants progress to opportunity recognition, identifying the gap between their current circumstances and a possible university future. The initial spark is particularly influential for first-in-family students, helping them view HE as both achievable and desirable. However, reliance on sparks risks excluding those without such influences or exposing students to biased guidance.

The subsequent stage involves a minimal and highly relational information search, as participants tend to rely more on recommendations from trusted sources than on extensive independent research. This aligns with Court et al.’s (2009) notion of early touch-points but diverges in emphasising embodied trust and cultural safety over digital or mass-marketing channels. Ultimately, the decision to enrol is influenced by a carefully

**Guidance Through Trusted Networks:** information gathering is relational and trust-based.



**Reciprocal Advocacy:** Students become trusted role models, sparking new HE pathways for future generations, while some return themselves for further studies, creating a loyalty loop.

**Figure 2.** The Indigenous-centred consumer decision-making framework (adapted from Court et al., 2009; Engel et al., 1968). The Indigenous-centred consumer decision-making framework was developed by Melissa Fong-Emmerson, Claire Lambert, Braden Hill and Maria M Ryan, and visually represented through artwork by Cassandra Edwards, a Gamilaraay woman based in Boorloo.

weighted set of attributes, including authentic inclusion, cultural and educational support, and the reputation of Indigenous Centres. While prior research has emphasised institutional factors in HE choice, this study shows Indigenous students prioritise cultural safety and belonging, distinguishing their pathways from mainstream models (e.g., Barney, 2022; Erasmus et al., 2001; Towers & Towers, 2020). In existing frameworks, the final stage, post-purchase evaluation, centres on satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and resulting WOM/eWOM behaviour (Towers & Towers, 2020), where reviews and digital platforms shape future choices. Although traditional WOM emerged here, Indigenous participants described post-enrolment influence in broader, relational terms. Positive experiences became advocacy within families and communities, inspiring younger relatives and peers to pursue HE. This extends beyond the transactional nature of reviews to encompass identity, reciprocity, and community responsibility, diverging from Towers and Towers (2020) focus on online WOM and Court et al.'s (2009) emphasis on loyalty and repurchase.

Indigenous students' decision-making deviates from the traditional CDMP model (Erasmus et al., 2001), with choices driven by trusted reference groups that spark the possibility of HE, normalise its feasibility and reinforce belonging through evaluation. This process is iterative, with students revisiting their decisions as they pursue further degrees, eventually becoming advocates for HE within their communities.

Four key insights emerged from the study. The first and most crucial insight is the importance of 'Sparks', moments from trusted sources that ignite students' interest,

drive motivation, signal possibilities and the belief that HE is achievable. Unlike traditional need recognition, sparks occur before students fully identify a gap, reframing the starting point of the journey and leading into opportunity recognition. The second insight concerns the minimal but relational information search stage, with students relying heavily on trusted reference groups and school outreach for guidance. The third insight reveals that students evaluate a set of core attributes either consciously or subconsciously before deciding on an institution. Finally, the fourth insight addresses the post-enrolment evaluation phase, extending influence across their community networks.

Figure 2 illustrates an adapted decision-making framework that builds upon the traditional CDMP model and Court et al.'s (2009) consumer decision journey, explicitly showing points of convergence (evaluation of attributes) and divergence (sparks as a distinct stage, relational search and advocacy-based post-purchase evaluation). This offers a culturally responsive approach to understanding Indigenous students' HE choices. This framework aligns with Towers and Towers (2020) focus showing how Indigenous students' advocacy and networks influence their community and future decisions.

## Discussion

This study emphasises the pivotal role of trusted connections; family, friends, counselors, Indigenous Centres and outreach professionals, in motivating Indigenous students to pursue HE. These motivational 'sparks' normalise HE as a viable pathway through relational, community-driven influences rather than conventional marketing (Fernandes & Panda, 2023). This challenges traditional consumer decision-making models, which typically assume a rational, linear process initiated by personal need recognition (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016). For many Indigenous students, the process begins before formal need identification, as external validation from trusted networks shapes their decision to view HE as an opportunity, unlike mainstream populations, who often rely on formal guidance, institutional websites or structured information.

This finding aligns with research on the nature of Indigenous decision-making, where storytelling and shared experiences play a central role in shaping choices (Holt & Perry, 2023). Unlike mainstream marketing models centred on advertising and digital engagement, commercial information sources played a limited role in participants' university choices. Trust in WOM, particularly from those who have navigated the 'Westernised' HE system was central to awareness and participation, contrasting with other student groups that may prioritise independent research and institutional rankings.

Theoretically, the proposed adapted decision-making represents a refinement and extension of the traditional five-stage CDMP, integrating Indigenous epistemologies and relational influences. Relationality, central to Indigenous worldviews, is an ethical system that situates identity, knowledge, and responsibility within a web of reciprocal relationships with human and non-human kin, including ancestors, the land, and the natural world. This stands in contrast with Western individualism, emphasising relational accountability as central to existence, with decisions grounded in interconnectedness and shared responsibility (Tynan, 2021). Rather than framing enrolment as an individual cognitive act, the framework recognises social, cultural and aspirational forces that shape Indigenous students' engagement with HE, positioning 'sparks' and

community validation as initiating stages. This model builds on the work of Welch (2023) and aligns with Love and Hall's (2022) call for marketing approaches that acknowledges the 'epistemologies, worldviews, and practices of the Indigenous inhabitants of the lands in which marketing is actually practiced and debated' (p. 206).

The findings confirm that exposure to successful role models within communities strengthens Indigenous students' perceptions of accessibility and achievability, bridging the gap between university marketing narratives and lived realities. These insights highlight the need for universities to move beyond representation and create culturally secure environments that are central to institutional strategies and support success and well-being. Such environments generate post-enrolment ripple effects, with participants often becoming advocates for HE within their communities. This reflects the 'loyalty loop' (Court et al., 2009), where positive experiences influence future generations. Consistent with Towers and Towers (2020), post-enrolment WOM extends through relational networks, further normalising HE as accessible pathways for Indigenous students. Culturally secure support endures beyond enrolment, fostering continued cycles of advocacy, mentorship, and engagement.

Amid new federal government funding that prioritises Indigenous student recruitment, these findings call for a reassessment of university engagement strategies with Indigenous learners. This aligns with literature on culturally inclusive HE (O'Kane et al., 2024). Current one-size-fits-all marketing models, grounded in Western frameworks, fail to resonate with Indigenous students, as evidenced in the study. This gap supports Raciti et al.'s (2018) emphasis on creating spaces where Indigenous students can 'be, become, and belong' (p. 5). Participants valued relational networks, Indigenous mentors and culturally safe environments that enabled success. They also sought universities that aligned with their passions, offering flexible learning and culturally relevant initiatives such as Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Schemes. These findings reinforce the need for culturally secure frameworks that help Indigenous students thrive academically and personally. Institutions must leverage relational networks, expand outreach, and invest in Indigenous mentors as trusted guides.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations. Reliance on retrospective accounts may have introduced recall bias, as participants reconstructed their decision-making in hindsight. Nevertheless, the findings highlight the need to examine how Indigenous students' perceptions and decisions evolve. The results are also context-specific and may not fully represent the diversity of Indigenous communities across regions.

## Implications and conclusion

This study challenges conventional consumer behaviour theories, demonstrating that Indigenous students' university decision-making is relational, community-driven, and culturally grounded. It aligns with Universities Australia (2022) and the Universities Accord (O'Kane et al., 2024), which prioritise Indigenous participation, completion, and leadership. The study offers practical implications, recommending that universities, Indigenous Centres and marketers should co-design outreach, marketing, mentorship,

and culturally safe spaces, supported by virtual engagement to reach remote students. Recruitment must be community-driven and aligned with Indigenous Centres, moving beyond Western models. Representation alone is insufficient; institutions must embed Indigenous worldviews, values, and relational guidance into practice, creating environments where students can thrive. The framework also recognises the diversity of Indigenous students, acknowledging how age, location, schooling, and family circumstances shape decision-making, making it representative rather than prescriptive.

Policies must prioritise co-design with Indigenous communities, so initiatives reflect local values and worldviews. Marketing and outreach should move beyond representation to authentic, community-driven storytelling that celebrates Indigenous success and belonging. Flexible pathways and culturally grounded support are essential to support Indigenous students' growth and achievement.

Future research should track decision-making longitudinally, analyse responses to institutional marketing and compare outcomes across Indigenous communities to refine culturally adaptive models. Ultimately, this study advances a relational, culturally grounded model of decision-making that extends consumer behaviour theory and offers universities a roadmap for more inclusive and effective engagement with Indigenous students.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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