

Student Experience Podcast

S1 E5 - Dr Melinda Mann

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SPEAKERS

Melinda Mann, Tanya R

Melinda Mann 00:00

Welcome to today's podcast. today I have the lovely Dr. Melinda Mann joining me. Melinda is a proud Darumbal woman and South Sea Islander who has forged a career advocating for equitable and accessible education. Melinda draws a lot of her professional experience in community education, training and development through her lived experience and also her upbringing in rural Queensland. She's also able to really draw on a lot of the stories that she collated as part of her PhD, where she was exploring the experience of indigenous youth on Darumbal country who were transitioning from year 12 into further studies or into work or community responsibilities. And all this brings a real informed and insightful approach to her work. In her current role as Deputy Director of Student Life and Wellbeing at CQ University, Melinda works to ensure education is accessible to all equity and disadvantaged student cohorts. I should also note that Melinda is a good friend of mine, and she was my boss a few years ago now. And she is one of the most inspiring women that I've had the pleasure to work with. So I'd like to thank you for joining us today, Melinda. Thank you for having me today. It's nice to be here. That's great. And I thought I'd start today by asking you, if you could share a bit about how having a lived experience, which can relate to students really helps when you try to develop an appropriate student experience. Such a good question. I think that, you know, I grew up. I grew up around here at the Rockhampton region, Rocky's my hometown, and then so I grew up, most of my childhood was spent between here and Mackay. Those are my stomping grounds. And I did that kind of my formal, formal years in those in that region, those rural townships along the railway line with a dad who worked on the railways and but both of my parents having grown up in this region as well, and my great grandparents and of course, I could go back for 1000s of generations, but my family being from this area, and then moving down into New South Wales in its teenager, and then coming back. So I think, you know, when you talk about having lived experiences and share the experiences with the people and the, the students that come to this institution, in particular, for me, it's just about being authentic to who I am, how I was raised, where I was raised, and the people that I, I live around and have lived around my entire my entire life. And so I think that the I think lived experience, and it's shared that experience with others. You know, it forms within yourself, as someone who works in higher ed, that higher education,

Authenticity, and you bring that into your workplace, it's how you see the world, it's how you view the issues of the world. And when you, you know, when it comes to education, and as you mentioned in the intro, my passion is making sure that the people from around this area and around areas that are similar right across the country have the access and have the opportunities that that I've been able to take advantage of that all of that comes from, you know, just being authentic to who I am as an individual, and in the reality of the world that I live in.

Tanya R 04:00

Cool. So I guess thinking on the outside of that we do have stuff throughout a university system that do have really valuable lived experiences. How do we make sure that as I guess an organization is an entity that we are actually making the most of that experience, and what those people in particular can bring and what insights they can bring to the student experience?

Melinda Mann 04:28

I think it's great when universities can reflect in our staff profile, their student profile, different demographics and their student profile. So coming from this region from a poor background, being the first in our family, to access higher education, and I know you're not the only person on this university, he's done. Lots of Central Queensland is through and through and I think that Really, it's really important in universities that we do reflect the cohorts of students who come through our universities, it makes. Yeah, again, going back to that, being authentic, it's being authentic to that to the experiences that our students are going through, that they are living, being first and family, knowing what that's like being able to make decisions that impact our students, knowing what that is, what it actually is, like, what the realities on the ground for students who are, you know, single parents, while he was studying online, another experience that I've had, being from remote areas or rural areas, known having to form networks and, you know, outside of your family, because the family's never been through university before and having to try and, you know, balance all of that, as well. So yeah, I think universities, you know, we, we have to reflect the profile of our students, when it comes to the people that we recruit new styles, you know, the nature, or the style of recruitment, recruitment processes that we go through, and how do we attract and make universities a place where, you know, where those types of people are, my type of people can come and, and work and contribute and be leaders and valued and assigned. And I think, I think the key thing is, is actually being listened to, isn't it? So that, yes, we bring these people here, but how do we make sure that we're, we're really valuing, and that's really through listening and learning from them. Yeah, and I think like, giving people the space, and, you know, trusting people to make decisions, when I reflect on the career I've had in higher ed, there have been key people that I've had entrusted me with making decisions, and, you know, being put into positions where I can be a leader. And that's made a huge impact not just on me and other Aboriginal culture on the people, or students, but others as well, you have been able to benefit from, you know, from the work that I've been able to do, and empower others to do to do the same. And I hope that others get the chance as well. But it does mean that you have to trust people, and, and share that space with others and make and make intentionally make space for other people to come in and, and to step back and allow others to make decisions. And yeah, I could go on a bit, we could be here all day. Let's take... given your experiences and what you've learned from others, because I know you have a really broad professional network as well. What suggestions or recommendations would you have for creating the best student experience overall. And then also, I guess, whether that's the same or whether that would be slightly

different for a particular equity groups, how we could make each group of students feel that they're getting the best experience for themselves. Um, I think, I think I thought that you've got to have students involved, all the time, in making decisions and designing, you know, the programs and the supports that we we design, we, we often think that we know what's best for students, or we can research we can find out find the data or we can understand and interpret things. And, and come up with ways to to support students that we think is how they want to be supported. And then we make these vast generalizations and we make a lot of assumptions about what students actually mean. But it is so important to always have students involved, and to make sure you listen to those students. And there are so many wins, of course that come out of that type of collaboration with students. I know, we know having working with Aboriginal torture on the students that often. There are assumptions made about what Aboriginal culture on the students experience, or about what regional and rural students experience or online students are first and family students experience. But their experiences change all the time, and what we think we knew that they needed two years ago, it might be something different today and if we don't keep in, if we don't have relationships and connections with shoes, Studying constantly are continually informed the work that we do, then it is really, it's really easy to miss key opportunities and significant times where students actually need support. And so I think, challenging ourselves to when you know, when we think we're the expert on what the student, what students experience, is, really, it's really important to challenge ourselves to challenge what we know. And to always, you know, come back to those relationships with students and connections and making sure we're informed by them. As much as we are informed by the reports and the data that we get when we, when we're looking at those or the research that gets done, we've always got to come back to student voices and making sure again, that we've got space for those students to have important to what we do. There is a real big challenge, isn't it? Because particularly supporting a really large number of students, it's easy to get caught up in that we need to systematize things, we need to have a process that is going to be the same for everyone. Because that's about efficiencies. And it's not necessarily about the effectiveness for the student, though, is it? And how we, how do we kind of come up with a balance so that it's kind of a win win for everyone? Yeah, it really is about centering students. And if you really do that, if you really value students and want want the student experience to be the center of supports and services, then you've got to have an honest conversation about what is at the center? Is it? Is it students? Or is it structures and processes? And oftentimes, it is the structures and processes that are at the center of what we do. And not not students? So I think it does come up, you know, there's a bit of fear involved, sometimes we're not, we're scared of what students might say, or what students or how that's going to reflect on us. And, but, you know, we've got to kind of get over ourselves and be open to criticism, and, you know, take it all and, and learn to grow from it. Yeah, and, you know, it's not easy is it? Because life's not easy, it's complex, the people that we're working with the complex, and the world is complex these days. So I think sometimes we kid ourselves that we can make it simple, when in fact, we're not actually addressing necessary, the problems, we're kind of, you know, maybe it's a band aid, or maybe we're sort of distracting ourselves from the actual situation. I know, when we get right, you see such a change, it's such a transformation in the students that you talk to. And it's such a powerful thing. And that's, you know, that's really important because we've we've got to ensure that we're learners as much as students awareness, and not think that it's this one way street, that where the university can we teach the students, but, you know, putting ourselves you know, having a loners disposition enables us to take the critique and, and to learn from what students say, from what they experience, and to fill in the gaps as well, and all of that knowledge, and not being afraid to be there to

be, you know, putting out place when, when we think we, we know what's best for students. And that is really important, it does come down to your own values and your own attitudes and beliefs. And when you can be humble and and understand that, you know, no one owns knowledge, no one owns it, no one owns that kind of, you know, if you if you become a student, yourself in the whole process of education, or aligner, in the process of education, regardless of where you sit at the you know, across the levels of education, then, you know, you've you're more open, I think, to understanding that taking, taking direction and instruction from from students themselves is part of that process of learning and growing together. So it's almost like evolution, isn't it from the industrial age, education format into what the information age and the ideas age and innovation? Yeah, absolutely. No, I always come back to you know, yarning circles, and that that idea of everyone is equal and that everyone is able to contribute and no one is the owners all knowledge people will specialize in particular things. But again, that there's a responsibility to ensure that everybody is heard and understood equally, and in their opinions are respected. And I think that's a good way to kind of, you know, to manage when it comes to you, at your workplaces and for the way that we create and supports and services for students as well.

Tanya R 15:28

Great. Well, that's all the questions that I have, was there anything else that you wanted to talk about or to share? While we're here?

Melinda Mann 15:40

Probably just, you know, I think when we, when we talk about an honor to your, your podcast, you're you're talking to lots of different lots of different people who are involved in education in some different different ways, I think, from the podcast that I have heard, that everyone brings something different, and differences, good, allow differences, differences should be celebrated, they should be acknowledged. I think that that's the only way that really, we can create really rich learning environments, environments, and work place environments is when you know, everyone can can be valued. Everyone can, can contribute in a way that is his way that makes them feel heard and seen. And, you know, that just contribute to a really rich fabric of society. So, you know, whether you, like me, come from a bush, you know, raised up in little small country towns, still be able to come to university and make a contribution, you know, in a Western institution, higher education institution. And I think, I think that's, that's great. And I think, I hope that many more people will will be able to will do that, especially here at our institution. And, yeah, that will celebrate all of our differences. Sounds exciting. It sounds really good. Well, thank you again, for joining me, Melinda. It's been lovely having this chat. And I look forward to having more in future and for sharing this with everyone. Thank you. Thanks, Tanya.