

# Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Presence: Opening Knowledge Pathways

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## Introduction

Lifting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business, inherently inclusive of Indigenous knowledges, from the margins of higher education is a work that has long been 'in progress'. The term 'Indigenous knowledges' as used here encompasses Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholarship, pedagogy, the cultural and specific knowledges of the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations as well as the shared epistemological tenets such as relationality that define and delineate Indigenous knowledges from the western frame predominant within the sector.

In its discussion, this paper takes a broad brush approach to how Indigenous knowledges are positioned within our universities. In doing this it recognises that its examples and debates will not be directly pertinent to all universities at this juncture. An individual institutionally applicable picture is unachievable without targeted empirical research. Rather, the paper uses a generic portrayal to underpin a broad discussion on the barriers to, and potential strategic directions for, addressing the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* Term of Reference iv:

the recognition and equivalence of Indigenous knowledges in the higher education sector.

## Mediating the Recognition Hazards

Strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges recognition within higher education is not a straightforward process; there are intrinsic risks in whatever strategies are devised. Yes, the sectoral marking of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recognition as a priority area is crucial to remediation. Yet the very act of singling out can lead to a re-marginalisation via the creation of Indigenous enclaves whereby all things Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tend to be slung automatically into this arena. Within this scenario Indigenous knowledges are relegated to, and restricted to, these spaces and as a result largely ignored within mainstream operations. Alternatively, integrating Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander dimensions into the mainstream business of the university risks a re-marginalisation on the basis of their minority status. Regardless of good intentions, Indigenous knowledges can easily become continually, if not permanently, subsumed under the weight of the always competing dominant knowledge matters. Underpinning these competing hazards is the foundational fact that equal recognition is unachievable while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain so heavily under-represented across all levels of the sector. The continuing low enrolment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander undergraduates, the higher under-representation among post-graduate students and the even higher under-representation of academic staff, especially at higher level positions<sup>1</sup>, mean the spaces and places where Indigenous knowledges can fit, let alone flourish, within the university sector, are currently severely constrained. The purpose of this paper is to analyse these tensions as they are currently manifested within the higher education system. These can be summarised as:

1. Confining of Indigenous place in universities to discrete multi-purpose and multi-tasked Centres segregates, devalues and inhibits Indigenous knowledges' place within the sector and constrains and excludes options for broader sector initiation, origination and/or dissemination
2. Outsourced service model of Indigenous knowledge content can be exploitative and limits how, when and what of Indigenous knowledges dissemination, undermining valuing by staff/students.
3. Indigenous knowledge capacity and expertise are deeply restrained by the long-standing chronic shortages of qualified academic staff, senior staff and graduate students.
4. Indigenous knowledges placement as 'apart' from mainstream university business normalises their exclusion from decision making processes.

The key emergent question is how to mediate the risks and hazards in the pursuance of a secure, sector wide, normalised space for Indigenous knowledge systems? The breadth of such an undertaking is beyond simple prescriptive determinations. Instead, this paper proposes, as an essential first step, the embedding of a facilitating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence, numerically, academically and culturally, across Australian university faculties, management and service areas. A number of potential supporting strategic measures for supporting Indigenous knowledge recognition pathways for students, staff, institutions and the sector are then suggested.

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1 A number of Australian universities have recently made senior Indigenous appointments.

### **Confining, Segregating and Excluding Knowledges**

Equal recognition of Indigenous knowledges is currently inhibited by the common fault line of separate, isolated, placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business within institutions. That is, existing strategies which recognise (necessarily) the uniqueness of the Indigenous place within the higher education system have tended to segregation. Consequently, what Indigenous knowledges do exist within an institution tend to be confined within an all encompassing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enclave with limited and restricted interaction with the wider university system. The ramifications of this usually unintended, but effective, incarceration are outlined below.

Since the inception of the National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP) (1990) the standard strategy has been the establishment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support centres within individual universities. Usually situated in a discreet, often purpose built, site within the campus, these Centres<sup>2</sup> vary significantly in size and function. All offer formal support programs such as tutorial assistance and informal services such as pastoral care and providing a culturally safe accessible meeting and study place for our students. A number also offer academic programs. Contemporarily, therefore, Centres are a core Indigenous knowledges resource. Their prominence, however, has a damaging downside. In a significant proportion of universities, such Centres *are* the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strategy. Responsible for all things Indigenous, Centres can become overburdened with policy, program, management and other responsibilities for which they were never designed. Centre's ability to articulate Indigenous knowledges is further incapacitated by their figurative, if not physical, placement out of sight and mind of the mainstream discussions or debates of university business.

### **Inhibiting Service Models of Dissemination**

Centre's capacity to be independent disseminators of Indigenous knowledges is also compromised by the unequal and unidirectional nature of current knowledge interactions. That is, Centre's knowledge's roles tend to only come into view as a service delivery outlet rather than as an independently valued repository of Indigenous knowledge. The dimensions of the knowledge required, and how, and when, and to whom it is to be delivered is also usually determined by the service user not the Centre; the capacity for Centre or other staff to initiate Indigenous knowledge input is either severely curtailed or non-existent. For example, Centre's are frequently called upon to provide cross-cultural, or more latterly cultural competence, training to staff and/or students; guest speakers or community members for Welcome to Country duties; in-teaching of Aboriginal and Torres

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'Centre' is used here to refer to the variable discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander units found within the large majority of Australian universities.

Strait Islander content; developing university reconciliation strategic plans and many other tasks. The argument here is not that Centres should not be engaged in these activities but rather the imbalanced nature of the relationship between the Centre as service provider and mainstream areas as knowledge service commissioners. A compliant service resource supplying commodified knowledges on demand is not compatible with the goal of equal recognition.

Reliance on the one stop shop for Indigenous knowledges services can also be problematic in its assumptions of the knowledge resources available. For example, with some occupations now mandating Indigenous content in qualifying coursework as a prerequisite for registration, Centres are increasingly called upon to teach-in the requisite 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bit'. This 'over to you' response can be a disservice to all the academic staff, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, as well as students and the profession. Such teaching requires specialist professional knowledge, be it social work, nursing, medicine, or education and expertise in successfully managing the interface between the profession and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia. Many Centres are not equipped, resourced, or have the capacity to achieve high level outcomes in these tasks. The bigger question here is not who should be doing such teaching, but why outsourcing this particular topic, and not others, is deemed appropriate pedagogic practice? Additionally, the hiving off of Aboriginal content responsibilities conveys a sense of limited value of such content to the course's students.

#### Constrained, Enclaved Knowledges Production

Equal recognition of Indigenous knowledges is also unachievable without a critical mass of qualified, skilled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars engaged in its study, origination and promulgation. Current Indigenous academic staff and post-graduate student numbers indicate that we are, as yet, a long way from this prerequisite. DEEWR (2009) data report 315 full time equivalent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic positions nationwide; an average of less than 10 per university. Proportionally recorded as just .62 percent of all academic staff in 2006 (DEST 2007) with no indication of any significant increase in the past five years, an increase of over 400 percent is required to achieve population parity. It should also be noted that numbers of Indigenous academics, while universally proportionally low, vary significantly by higher education institution. The University of Newcastle for example has 19 Full Time Equivalent teaching and research staff, while the University of Western Sydney has only three (DEEWR 2010). Similar imbalances are observable across the institutional listings. Critically, very few of these are found among the sector's senior ranks with the recent appointments of PVC and Deputy PVC Indigenous positions at Charles Darwin University, University of Queensland and the University of Sydney noted as encouraging exceptions.

As critically, very few are employed in faculties or schools outside Indigenous Centres. While academic concentration normally translates into a scholarly attribute, establishing a base for strong teaching and research function, in Centres, such concentration tends to constitute developmental barriers. The core issue is that unlike mainstream departments, where academic staff are spread across levels of expertise and seniority, most Centre staff are academically junior, either still working towards post-graduate qualifications or early career researchers. Only 15 percent of Indigenous academic staff holds a Doctorate compared with 57 percent of non-Indigenous academics (DEST 2005). Experienced Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander researchers to operate as role models are both few in number and institutionally dispersed.

Additionally, Centres, by virtue of their multiple and specific roles differ dramatically different in form and function to mainstream schools, departments and faculties. Their employment structures tend towards a preponderance of general staff with 2009 data (DEEWR) reporting two thirds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Full Time Equivalent positions are held by general staff. The consequence of limited research track records and a non-standard employing entity structure is a propensity for Centres to become isolated hinterlands of scholarly inexperience, removed from the formal and informal academic mentoring and career support processes that occur elsewhere within the university. For example, in my first tenured appointment within a Centre as a just completed PhD I was charged with furthering the Centre's research agenda. While willing to undertake this task I was fundamentally ill-equipped experience and track record wise for the role. In contrast, in my subsequent appointment to a mainstream department I was immediately inducted into projects led by senior researchers where I built invaluable track record while simultaneously acquiring research expertise and skills in the intricacies and processes of successfully applying for grants. The point is that Indigenous knowledges cannot achieve its potential or its place within the higher education sector without significant and targeted investment in its scholars. The heavy weighting of track record for success in winning research grants and research funding combined with the lack of a recognised place or understanding of Indigenous research methodologies by non-Indigenous supervisors, university research offices, or funding entities exacerbate the problem.

### **Excluded from Mainstream Business**

Relatedly, while graduate offices hold generic responsibility for institutions' post-graduate programs, a 2009 survey (see Walter & Robertson 2009) found very, very few report any specific recruitment activity or program support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students despite their current massive under-representation. The result is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander post-graduates are frequently on their own in navigating the fraught path of post-graduate study, supervision and examination; and one that is epistemologically out of sync with Indigenous knowledges. Successful completions suffer as a result. This assertion is confirmed by my experience co-facilitating (with Professor

Moreton-Robinson) a national series of Indigenous research methodology Masterclasses in 2009/2010. Our participants, primarily Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander post-graduates (and often simultaneously Centre staff), continually expressed frustration that their use and development of Indigenous knowledges within their scholarship was not understood by their faculty or supervisors and they were continually pressured to conform to mainstream epistemological norms i.e. collecting qualitative data using in depth interviews is acceptable, using yarning methods is not. This is not an argument for a lowering of scholarly rigour. Rather, it reflects the current position of a dearth of understanding of, or recognition of, Indigenous knowledges within the formal structures of scholarship which at present fatally undermine any possibility of equal recognition.

Finally, by inverse logic, a normalcy of Indigenous knowledges as separately quartered terrain translates to the university mainstream neither being expected to cater for, nor have an understanding of, such knowledges. Hovering perhaps within the institutions' collective subconscious rather than explicitly stated Centre knowledges responsibility, by definition, exempts all other university management, faculties, sections or service areas, processes and functions from accountability. More insidiously, this permeating practice segregates the Indigenous from the day to day as well as the critical events of university operations. That is, unless an issue, policy, program, priority etc specifically includes the words Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or Indigenous, the production, dissemination or potential contribution of Indigenous knowledges will be absent from consideration in executive planning, discussion, debates or decisions. University business, at the macro and micro level, is normalised as exclusive of Indigenous knowledges.

## **Integrating a Dynamic and Initiating Indigenous Knowledges Presence**

How can the nurturing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges *and* an overt recognition of their equal value and validity become standard higher education operating procedure? Reducing existing barriers is part of the solution. The overall objective here is the opening of an integrated, all areas, Indigenous presence to support knowledge pathways for students, staff, institutions and the sector. Based around the barriers identified in this paper this objective can be subdivided into two connected areas. These are:

- *Broaden the Indigenous place and space within the university and the sector*
- *Build university and sector investment in Indigenous knowledges scholarship*

Meeting this objective will require national as well as individual institution initiatives. The following section suggests a range of strategies that can contribute to the achievement of these strategic action areas. This is not a comprehensive list; other and probably better strategies and initiatives will emerge from the review. Rather the aim is to start the conversation on how the sector might actively further the process of recognising and equally valuing Indigenous knowledges.

### ***Broaden the Indigenous place and space within the university***

This strategy is not about curtailing Indigenous Centres. Centres remain a fundamental participant in transforming outcomes and are a core resource for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their institutions. Rather, it is about raising the recognition and valuing of Indigenous knowledges via the infiltration and integration of an Indigenous presence throughout universities and the sector. Suggested strategies to achieve this outcome could include:

- Normalise within institutions and the sector the concept of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff being employed across all areas. Specific strategies could include:
  - Secondment programs for Centre staff to faculties, finance, management and student support areas etc to broaden experience and build skills and career opportunities.
  - Introduce stratified institutional performance targets with the aim of achieving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment parity by 2022. Stratification by type, section and area is necessary to ensure outcome parity and representation outcomes.
  - Actively target the employment expectation of qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in faculties and departments whose courses include Indigenous content. (see also the first point 1 in next sub-objective)

- Provide Indigenous knowledges a representative voice in institutional and sector decision making via high level Indigenous appointments within the university executive and management.
- Introduce, nationally, a recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems as a generic student attribute

***Build university and sector investment in Indigenous knowledges scholarship***

Indigenous academic and professional staff are central to the development of Indigenous knowledge systems in teaching and research. An obvious prerequisite for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges finding a natural place within faculty and department materials is appropriately qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff being employed within the faculty.

- Create a system of supported academic apprenticeships within departments and faculties. These would be used to nurture talented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders through the qualification and skills acquisition needed to acquire tenured positions.
- Establish internal post-graduate scholarship systems to support Centre (and other) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to complete their post-graduate studies.

Harnessing the power of diverse Indigenous knowledges requires a network of Indigenous researchers. The aim is to position Indigenous researcher presence and knowledges as integral to the fabric of Australian scholarship. To achieve this vision a critical mass of active scholars is required to strengthen and sustain knowledges production and to develop the field. Support mechanisms could include:

- Require each institution to develop an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research strategy that has building internal Indigenous research capacity as its major objective.
- The establishment of a discrete Indigenous Centre of Researcher Development to provide a nationally coherent, locationally flexible, program of Indigenous researcher capacity building and leadership development. This strategic direction was recommended in the 2009 report produced for IHEAC *Scoping an Indigenous Centre of Researcher Development*.

A clear pathway also needs to be mapped for students that will guide them from undergraduate to post-graduate to career. Support systems for Indigenous research students also need to be strengthened and formalised within institutions. Specific strategies could include:

- Introduce institutional post-graduate targets for both enrolment and completions. It is important to task Graduate Offices with the targets and role of recruiting,

supporting and guiding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduate students through the system.

- Embed Indigenous research methods, methodology and protocol training into the repertoire of institutions' mainstream research higher degree support programs. Beneficiaries include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander post-graduates, their supervisors and non-Indigenous students undertaking research in the field of Indigenous studies.

### **Conclusion**

Indigenous knowledges are currently marginalised in a myriad of ways and distinct and tangible barriers to achieving recognition and equal value within higher education remain firmly in place. Addressing these barriers will require significant commitment of will, resources and strategic innovation from the sector, nationally and institutionally, the bureaucracy and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. Significant attainments are, however, achievable in the short to medium term.

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