# Exploring an Indigenous graduate attribute project through a critical race theory lens

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Graduate attributes are a mechanism not only for developing employability skills, but also for fostering graduate abilities to be productive contributors to social change. There is growing recognition that university graduates *can* and should contribute to enhancing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians signalling the need for dedicated Indigenous curriculum for all university students. Consider the transformative possibilities of significant numbers of graduates empowered to work effectively in partnership with Indigenous Australians. In 2014 almost 10,000 students graduated from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). Reflecting the organisational culture, graduate attributes also illustrate the values of an institution. In 2014, responding to the Behrendt Review of *Higher Education Access and Outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (2012) call for whole of university approaches, UTS approved the development of an Indigenous Graduate Attribute (IGA) Framework for all university courses. Recognising that resources would be required to support the implementation of such an ambitious project, a proposal was made to establish an Indigenous academic expertise centre to support the implementation of IGAs in all courses. In this paper the Aboriginal academic staff leading the IGA project will draw on Critical Race Theory (CRT), including the work of Ladson-Billings, to reflect on our experiences in the first year of the project. We use CRT to highlight the ways in which institutions might work with Indigenous academics to optimise the success of complex projects such as the UTS Indigenous Graduate Attribute project.

**Keywords:** graduate attributes, Indigenous Australian, Critical Race Theory

## Prologue

This paper discusses the work we are undertaking in the area of Indigenous Graduate Attributes. However, in order to fully understand the complexities at hand, we offer some of our journey as a way to speak about the establishment of our Centre, our work, and some of the complexities faced by Indigenous academics. The three of us have been employed by the University of Technology Sydney since February 2015, forming a new Centre known as the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges (CAIK). Prior to this we were a crucial part of an Indigenous Studies Department at a nearby university. Whilst avoiding a lengthy discussion about our experiences there, it is reasonable to say that we had observed recent adverse changes at our previous institution and regularly felt like our Indigeneity was

not respected or valued, and that our voices were not heard. Despite such feelings within our own institutional setting, we were widely recognised in the sector as leading Indigenous scholars. A review of our previous department conducted six months after our departure stated

> Research income to the Department (2011-2014) reported in the Self-Evaluation Review totals more than $1 million and includes three ARC Indigenous Discovery Awards and includes HERDC income for 2014 of $264,000. This is a significant achievement… All of the Category 1 Research Income are linked to the three Aboriginal academics who have departed the institution (Nakata, Walter & Howitt, 2015).

The University of Technology Sydney was seen as an innovative institution which recognises Indigenous Knowledges, culture and people and demonstrates considerable professional respect. For example there are currently five Indigenous Professorial appointments at UTS and also a number of Associate Professors. As outsiders, we were aware of and respected UTS and the work they were doing in the Indigenous arena. Fortunately for us UTS recognised our skills and expertise, our collaborative approach to academia and our scholarship as individuals. We were offered tenured contracts, two at the Professorial level and one at the Associate Professor level, to join UTS and lead the institution in what would later be classified as "an intellectual exercise of mammoth proportions" (Trudgett, 2016).

We tell this story though, not because we wish to proclaim our own success, but in the spirit of Critical Race Theory and the foundational pillar of presenting counter narratives which enliven and give voice to our experiences (Lynn & Adams, 2002). We wish to put our story at the centre of this narrative to highlight some ways in which universities, wishing to develop their own Indigenous graduate attributes projects, might begin. In addition we wish to underscore our agency as Indigenous academics, noting that our worth is not always recognized (Fredericks, 2011) and our work is too often taken for granted (Asmar & Page, 2009). Despite the positive intent of many of our colleagues, marginalisation of Indigenous academics continues to be keenly felt in education; as noted above, we ourselves have experienced the subtle institutional marginalisation which stems from institutional policy which purports to enhance outcomes for Indigenous Australians but fails to provide the requisite organisational structures within which to achieve their stated aims. We saw an opportunity at UTS to undertake groundbreaking work in an institution which valued our skills. Critical Race Theory is at its heart about change (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Notwithstanding the extent to which white privilege and underpinning structural inequity might remain in our universities, we want to explore the ways that structure has been challenged at UTS and our role in it.

## Introduction

Universities are increasingly under pressure to produce graduates ready to engage with the professional workforce (Bridgstock, 2009). In the context of workplace uncertainty and rapidly changing technology, graduates are expected to be highly skilled to meet the persistent demands of the knowledge economy (Kalfa &Taksa, 2015). Graduate attributes have become a mechanism not only for developing employability skills, but for institutions to demonstrate to employers and potential graduates that the requisite skills will be developed over the course of a graduates' university education (Bath, Smith, Stein, & Swann, 2004; Denson & Zhang, 2010). Currently graduate attributes tend to focus on generic skills such as communication,

critical thinking, and working collaboratively (Oliver, 2011), considered necessary for employability. Increasing globalization is also driving universities to foster graduate intercultural and international skills, as well as developing graduate abilities to be productive contributors to social change (Barrie, 2007). Universities may also use graduate attributes as a point of differentiation to distinguish their particular areas of focus and to link disciplinary curricula with skills future workplace capabilities (Oliver, 2013).

There is also a growing recognition that university graduates can and should, contribute to enhancing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, signalling the need for dedicated Indigenous curriculum for all university students. In 2007 the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council recommended that Indigenous Cultural Competence should be a graduate attribute for all university students (Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council 2007, p.5). Successive reports (Universities Australia, 2011; Behrendt, Larkin, Kelly & Griew, 2012) have continued to argue that graduates can contribute to improved outcomes for Indigenous Australians but that there are specific skills and knowledges required for graduates are able to work effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Indeed, it has been repeatedly observed by Indigenous scholars that research and practice, whilst claiming to represent or improve the experiences of Indigenous Australians, often fail in their effectiveness. This failure is largely due to working solely through a non-Indigenous and sometimes stereotypical standpoints, (Behrendt, 2013; Walter & Andersen, 2013; Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2014). By greatly increasing the ability and capacity of graduates to both respect and work with Aboriginal communities, resistance to the protocols and the diverse needs of Aboriginal communities will lessen, and empowerment of these communities will be strengthened. As Behrendt et al., (2012) indicates, better understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contemporary issues will

> … help to equip them [graduates] as professionals to better meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities with whom they will be doing business and to whom they will be providing service (p.74).

## The University Context

Reflecting the organisational culture, graduate attributes also illustrate what is valued by an institution (Barrie, Hughes & Smith, 2009). In 2013, responding to the Behrendt Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (2012) call for whole of university approaches, the University of Technology Sydney approved the development of an Indigenous Graduate Attribute (IGA) Framework (Academic Board Meeting 13/5, November, 2013). During the period 2012-2013 the university's Indigenous Studies Committee considered a UTS Indigenous Graduate Attribute (IGA) Discussion Paper (Sherwood, McDaniel & McKenzie, 2013), critically drawing on the expertise of senior Indigenous staff (authors one and two). The key recommendation of the report was that all UTS graduates should develop Indigenous Professional Competency through the implementation of a university wide Indigenous Graduate attribute. This in keeping with the university's stated aim that

> Social justice and inclusiveness is explicit in our curriculum, policies, strategies and plans and in our culture, beliefs, values and ways of working (http://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/strategic_plan_2016.pdf).

It is not uncommon for work labelled as Indigenous to fall to existing Indigenous staff (Page & Asmar, 2008). However, tabled Academic Board documents indicate that the university explicitly recognised that additional resources would be required to support the implementation of such an ambitious project. Consequently a proposal was made to establish an Indigenous academic expertise centre to support the implementation of IGAs in all courses. Staff from the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges are now leading the project.

## Critical Race Theory

The overarching foundations of Critical Race Theory (CRT) have been attributed to the early struggles of the African-American civil rights movement and it has been argued that CRT emerged as a result of the subsequent slow progress of social justice and legal reform (Zamudio, Russel, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). The central tenet of CRT is that inequality stems from entrenched, systemic racism (Vaught & Castagno, 2008). The corollary to this is the ideology of whiteness which acts to normalise and maintain white dominance (Nishi, Matias, Montoya, & Sarcedo, 2016). Critical race theorists examine and challenge this structural bias to generate social change. Whilst CRT's origins centred on legal studies within America, its principles have been applied across a wide diversity of cultures and disciplines including health (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010), sociology (Brown, 2003), and education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT has been applied widely in education, following Ladson-Billings and Tate's pioneering work (1995).

The work in education has focused on colourblindness, selective admissions policies and campus racial climate (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015), highlighting structural inequity even in apparently socially just contexts. In common with Indigenous Standpoint approaches (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003) voice and narrative are critical elements of CRT approaches (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Like Indigenist Research methodologies (Rigney, 1999) CRT approaches aim to be emancipatory, with a key aim being to identify the role imposed notions of race and privilege play in forming the discourse surrounding education, and Indigenous education, today. With such a recognition, more centred narratives on Indigenous standpoints experiential knowledge can be voiced to break down false perceptions of neutrality in education and research, and ultimately rewrite the dominant non-Indigenous historical and contemporary epistemologies that still plague Indigenous education (Ford, 2013; McLaughlin & Whatman, 2011; Walter & Butler, 2013)

For the purposes of this paper we will use our own voices to create a narrative and to raise concerns for both ourselves as Indigenous academics working within a predominantly white institution and for the organisation. In keeping with Dixon and Rousseau's (2005) advice that CRT should be in conversation with itself, but mindful of Ladson Billings' caution to examine the ideas the storytelling raises, this paper will include our story but also an exploration of two key CRT issues. First, colour blindness and second whiteness as property. Ultimately we are interested in a critical race praxis (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2011) which links the theoretical concerns of CRT with our everyday practice as we implement the Indigenous Graduate Attribute project.

## Reflections on our first year of work

During this first year of work on the project we have focused on three key activities. First, we have worked to understand our new institution and critically the Learning and Teaching

decision making processes. Second, we have developed a comprehensive project Implementation Plan and IGA framework. Third, we have worked to develop and foster key relationships within the organisation.

**Countering colour blindness and race neutrality**

CRT's founding legal scholars identified entrenched structural racism as a considerable barrier to African American equity; and this notion of structural barriers to minority attainment has subsequently become one of the central pillars of CRT (Harris, 1993). Bell (1991, cited in Ledesma & Calderón, 2015) points to the routine subordination of African-Americans which supports persistent White privilege. This notion is echoed by Australian scholars such as Moreton-Robinson (2000), who highlight the invisibility of the power and privilege that flows from Whiteness in ways that continue to dominate Indigenous Australians. In Higher Education Indigenous representation statistics illustrate the degree of subordination and exclusion evident in both student and staff figures (Behrendt, et al., 2012). Colour blindness as an "act of whiteness that ignores the role of race" (Nishi, Matias, Montoya, & Sarcedo, 2016), is one of the mechanisms by which this dominance is maintained. Appointment on merit – a key pillar of colour blindness – fails to account for the antecedent discrimination which means that there are not, for example, suitable Indigenous candidates available for job selection.

We want to illustrate what it might look like if a university, rather than ignoring race, considers it important and to explain how that might be perceived for Indigenous scholars. The suggestion that race or in this case Indigeneity, has a critical role in relation to the IGA project may seem obvious. There is some agreement that this work is necessary and Indigenous scholars are vital to this work, although it is not necessarily agreed, that Indigenous scholars have primacy in this area. Behrendt's call for Indigenous content in the curriculum was met with some opposition (Hughs & Hughs, 2013) from scholars concerned about both space in the curriculum and the need for such change.The literature, however is replete with examples of non-Indigenous educators exploring the limits of their ability to teach Indigenous Studies without the contribution of Indigenous scholars, and voices (Gair, 2007; McGloin, 2009).

The appointments of three senior Indigenous academics to undertake the IGA project is arguably an example countering colour blindness. We are not aware of this level of commitment at any other Australian universities. Certainly not in a structure where there is a stand-alone centre dedicated to the task. The mistake commonly made by universities is that they become stuck in old rhetoric of 'Indigenising the curriculum' which sometimes leads to a scramble to find one or two low level people (who may or may not be Indigenous) to help a group of academics to insert some Indigenous content somewhere in their subject. Whilst undoubtedly well intentioned, this approach fails to encompass the university wide, systematic action which is likely to lead to the enduring structural and institutional cultural change required to genuinely Indigenise the (whole) curriculum.We argue that universities now need to demonstrate a serious commitment to students, and by extension Indigenous peoples and communities, by using the graduate attribute model. In addition it optimally requires expertise in both learning and teaching as well as Indigenous Studies to ensure that curriculum is pedagogically sound.

The seniority of our appointments affords us privileges which are vital to achieving the outcomes both we and the university are seeking in relation to the IGA project (explored further below). As an example, our Centre is located in a modern space, specifically designed

to meet the needs and objectives of CAIK. It is a discrete space which speaks to our authority, leadership and Indigeneity. In deeming physical space as an important component of our work, the university has recognised our sovereignty and our right to assert it.

**Curriculum as property**

Harris (1993) has contended that whiteness is equivalent to the legal term property (1993) and that a set of privileges flow from whiteness not unlike the ownership rights which usually flow from property tenure. Ladson-Billings (1998) has subsequently built on that notion to suggest that property in education equals curriculum and that ownership of the curriculum affords power and authority. She argues that the official curriculum is a "culturally specifically artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p.18). While that is confronting language, audits of university curricula tend to bear out this assertion. Asmar (2011) and Anning, Holland & Wilson (2012) in curriculum audits at their respective universities found little Indigenous specific curriculum and no evidence of systematic development of curriculum in order to meet specific graduate outcomes. An audit, preceding the current project, at our own institution, revealed obvious pockets of Indigenous curriculum (Norman, 2012), but little to suggest systematic or comprehensive coverage at that time.

We have however come some way from the universal master scripting and silencing to which Ladson-Billings refers. The professions, such as Medicine and Nursing have mandated requirements for Indigenous curriculum and at our own university are working towards deeply and thoughtfully embedding Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum (Virdun, Gray, Sherwood, Power, Phillips, Parker, & Jackson 2013). We are also aware of terrific, localised work being done in a range of disciplines. Hoping that things will just get better gradually though is not the answer and neither is relying on the work of the small numbers of Indigenous academics or those interested non-Indigenous people, to make the kind of change envisioned by the Behrendt Review (2012). The curriculum cannot remain the sole provenance of dominant discipline authorities who don't see the need for Indigenous perspectives, particularly in the absence of any institutionally or professionally mandated statute.

In establishing a university-wide Indigenous graduate attribute the university has signalled that Indigenous professional capability is a necessary graduate skill. This will require many more academics to engage with Indigenous curriculum than currently do. One of the key privileges of property ownership is the right to exclude (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Arguably academics no longer have singular ownership of curricula, however our role in leading this project implies that we, as Indigenous academics, have some dominion over multiple curricula. Our appointments and the university's decision to embark on this project, ostensibly means that there is no right to exclude Indigenous perspectives from the curriculum. By extension we have the privilege of guiding what goes in the curriculum.

Seen in this light the decision to implement an Indigenous Graduate Attribute is perhaps counter to narrative of white authority. To further cement the ceding of power and authority the university has a policy structure (https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/gsu-aboututs-organisations-pdf-chart-ctteestructure2013-2.pdf) which means that executive staff, from Deans to the Vice Chancellor, have specific accountabilities in relation to the IGA. This structure includes high level committees with senior Indigenous staff and external Indigenous members who have the opportunity to monitor the outcomes and question any shortfall in

outcome. Of course we would be naïve to think that the case we have outlined above is unequivocal. Below we outline some of the limitations we see to the case outlined above.

## Challenges

Here we explore some of the limitations of privilege and power we are feeling now and the risks for both ourselves and the institution, and the effect of these limitations might have for the success of our project. The challenges inherent in such an ambitious project are likely to be both big and small and guaranteed to be multiple. For the purposes of this paper we want to raise two specific issues, the first more overarching and the second more local. First, we earlier made the argument that our appointments were in effect the opposite of colourblindness. The institution – that is the university senior executive - recognised that for this role both our expertise and our Indigeneity were vital and valuable. The university has also created a structure in which there is both responsibility for, and accountability to, Indigenous Australians in relation to our achievements cementing the centrality of race. Second we have argued that leadership of the Indigenous Graduate Attribute project equated, in CRT terms, to property. Below we explore these two points in further detail.

### Centrality and visibility

We have argued that we are both physically and structurally embedded in the university. This accords us a centrality and visibility we have not experienced in our previous roles in Indigenous Centres. However, Ladson-Billings (2005) cautions that minorities are only allowed to effect change to the extent that our efforts do not impinge on the established order. In this case we believe that the established order has already been challenged to some extent by our appointments and the championing of the IGA project in this fashion. UTS is not the only university to take up the challenge of embedding Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum (Anning, Holland & Wilson, 2012) nor the only university to have an Indigenous graduate attribute (see Asmar, 2011 for examples). Through our Implementation Plan we are already shaping and guiding the university's response. Our experience has been that the university executive mandate our work, however we now expect some vacillation as we work with our colleagues to fully realise the project outcome of all students in the university meeting the requirements of the Indigenous Graduate Attribute.

### Transforming the curriculum

There are two key challenges here. First, while Indigenous perspectives can no longer be excluded from the *master script*, what we now have in a sense, is joint ownership of curriculum. Second, flowing from the first is the risk that Indigenous Knowledges may become appropriated and repackaged (Ladson-Billings, 2005), particularly over time, by non-Indigenous academics. Conversations concerning race are often difficult, sometimes resulting in antagonism and misunderstanding (Sue, 2013). Indigenous educators, for example, note the emotional labour associated with both working in 'mainstream' universities and the stress that can stem from working with resistant non-Indigenous students and non-Indigenous staff who at times misunderstand the extent to which Indigenous academics can support them (Asmar & Page, 2009). Critically in our situation, we need to convince both our academic colleagues and a succession of students that race is vital. We come to this both theoretically, and experientially prepared for robust but ultimately successful exchanges that result in enhanced curriculum which prepares graduates to consider and work effectively with, in a range of disciplinary and professional contexts.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that Indigenous graduate attribute projects are both ambitious and complex. Any whole of institution change is likely to be fraught with challenges. Indigenous Graduate Attribute projects are further complicated by the small pool of Indigenous academics with the requisite experience and expertise available for these roles. Additionally, universities too often fail to understand how their structures, both visible and invisible, impede and derail such projects. A CRT analysis can illuminate some of those impediments and highlight how they might be overcome. Our experiences at UTS have been that appointment at senior level, and recognition of our expertise and Indigeneity have afforded us privileges within the institution which are commonly the province of White managers. Universities can increase their chances of success by carefully considering their commitment, and through developing the structural processes that foster success rather than allowing the proliferation of barriers which too commonly lead to project shortfalls, unmet expectations and anguish for both Indigenous academics and university executives. In this way graduates will develop Indigenous professional capacity to enhance services for Indigenous peoples and Indigenous academics are recognised for their unique skillset and expertise.

## Acknowledgements

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