

Empowering Aboriginal aspirations in Australian university structures and systems

Leanne Holt

University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia
leanne.holt@newcastle.edu.au

Robert Morgan

University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia
robert.morgan@newcastle.edu.au

The Commonwealth Government's recent strategy to encourage a 'whole of university' approach to Indigenous higher education is being translated across the sector as requiring a mainstreaming strategy of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs. In spite of the continued changes adopted by universities, there has been little progress in the participation rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In actual fact, the national average of Indigenous student participation at universities across Australia has decreased from 0.61% in 2010 to 0.55% in 2014 (Commonwealth Department of Education, 2015). Australian Aboriginal higher education has a relatively recent history, largely commencing in the early 1980s following the establishment of academic and cultural support programs, commonly referred to as 'Aboriginal enclaves'. Today a new era of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and research has emerged, one that has the potential to redefine the nature and scope of the relationship that Aboriginal peoples have with the academy. After introducing the evolution of Australian Aboriginal higher education, the paper responds to the vision of the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*. A case study on Aboriginal higher education within an Australian university will introduce an example of a successful structure that delivers sustainable outcomes in all facets of Aboriginal higher education within the university environment. The paper reveals how universities can move beyond an environment of hegemonic control and mainstreaming, identifying options for the provision of a culturally affirming and intellectually engaging space within the academy.

Keywords: Aboriginal; governance; culture

Introduction

In the early 1980s the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC), an all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander committee appointed as a principal advisor to the Department of Education, adopted an initiative to graduate '1,000 Teachers by 1990' (Hughes & Willmott, 1982). Universities were seen to be a foreign and isolating place for Aboriginal people therefore to ensure success of the initiative it was imperative that educational providers offered a safe haven for Aboriginal students to seek support (Jordan, 1985). The NAEC in conjunction with the State Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECG) negotiated with Universities and Colleges of Advanced Education the introduction of Aboriginal enclave programs designed to essentially enrol Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in teacher education training and to enhance their potential for success.

Since the introduction of these Aboriginal enclave programs the higher education sector has experienced vast changes and new models of Aboriginal higher education have attempted to provide an enhanced sense of self determination and autonomy. These models aim to privilege an Aboriginal standpoint, cultures and knowledge systems, whilst aligning with the core business of universities, especially in respect to an ontological approach to teaching and research (Moreton-Robinson, 2014; Nakata, 1998; Rigney, 1997). The new educational era has also heralded a shift away from the anachronistic 'enclave' model to a community grounded 'whole of university' approach. A number of Australian Universities have welcomed the emergence of the new model and they continue to negotiate and improve the working relationship with the Aboriginal community. However, not all Universities have embraced the need for change. Some have held firm to the 'enclave' model that essentially positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as guests (The Guest Paradigm) in a pool of mainstream academic culture and tradition (Morgan, 1992). This paper argues the need for privileging Aboriginal perspectives and knowledges towards the advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student and higher education outcomes.

An historical overview of the development of an Australian Aboriginal higher education presence

Critical to the potential success of the 1000 Aboriginal teachers by 1990 initiative was the concept of academic and cultural support programs, that the NAEC argued, was needed to ensure that universities and Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE) were able to support the access and progression of Aboriginal teacher education students (Bin-Salek, 1990). Prior to the 'Enclave' initiative Aboriginal participation in Australian higher education was extremely limited and Morgan, a long term member of the NAEC, recalls that it was only possible to pry open the doors to higher education for Aboriginal people when special funding was provided by the Commonwealth (Morgan, 2014). This was the catalyst that broke down the barriers to higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, doors that had been historically shut tight to effectively exclude Aboriginal participation. In spite of some reluctance by institutions, 'Enclaves' were gradually introduced in the early 1980s to a variety of Australian Universities and Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) (Bin-Salek, 1990; Jordan, 1985).

By the late 1980s all Australian universities and CAEs had introduced a form of 'enclave' to support the enrolment and participation of Aboriginal students, particularly in teacher education programs. After the initial introduction of 'enclaves', primarily as student support centres, they were soon transformed into broader service centres aimed at the attraction, retention and success of Aboriginal students across all disciplines of higher education. During the 1990s further progress witnessed the introduction of Aboriginal studies subjects, courses and programs. These initiatives were offered to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Aboriginal research capacities were also being explored around this time and soon Aboriginal research centres became a feature of the changing face of Aboriginal higher education and in 1996 competitive commonwealth government research funding was provided to establish Aboriginal research centres (Rigney, 1997).

However, the innovative and transformative era of the early years of Australian Aboriginal higher education, with its focus on both access and the recognition of Aboriginal knowledge, cultural celebration and affirmation, is currently being challenged. Challenged by a trend whereby Australian Aboriginal higher education spaces are now required to devote more of their time to working out how they can better fit the culture of the academy rather than

defining and implementing cultural and academic standards that privilege and celebrate Aboriginal culture, knowledge and wisdom. The progressively popular intention to mainstream Aboriginal higher education programs is evidenced by the fact that a steadily increasing number of Australian universities are currently engaged with devising and adopting strategies that dismantle Aboriginal higher education spaces to align their academic teaching, research and student engagement services and programs with mainstream faculties and services. The mainstreaming of Aboriginal higher education is disturbing given its assimilationist focus and if allowed to persist will inevitably result in turning back the clock of Aboriginal higher education and the tremendous advances that have been made during the past three decades. The early transformative work of the now defunct NAEC that led to the creation of higher education academic and cultural spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will be lost. Spaces that were designed to recognise and celebrate the intrinsic value and uniqueness of Aboriginal ontology, epistemology and axiology within higher education learning environments (NAEC, 1986).

When Aboriginal student engagement, teaching and research is structured and informed predominantly by Eurocentric education methods and objectives, Aboriginal education methods and practices are relegated to a position of inferiority. The new models that have been developed by some Universities invariably means that the only thing Aboriginal about the models are the Aboriginal people who are recruited to fill positions that serve the interest of the academy. An attendant issue, also witnessed in other Indigenous groups, with the current move to mainstream Aboriginal higher education programs, is the emergence of a group of Aboriginal academics whose identity is informed more by heritage rather than culture and this practice could result in achieving the mainstreaming of Aboriginal higher education by default (Rata, 2011). A determination needs to be considered to deliver the best outcomes for Aboriginal peoples and their communities; is the requirement truly an Aboriginal space informed by Aboriginal values and perspectives or a space informed by western viewpoints with Aboriginal people employed.

Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

In July 2012 the report of the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (the Review) was released. The Review provided the most comprehensive study of Aboriginal higher education in our nation's history. It examined the myriad of complex and at times contested spaces of higher education for Aboriginal Australians and submitted a total 35 recommendations to better define processes and strategies to support the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education studies.

The precise details and recommendations of the Review will not be canvassed here. However, it is illuminating and instructive to share the Review Panel's vision for Aboriginal higher education.

While the ultimate aim of the Review is to achieve parity in higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff, the Panel's vision is much broader. In coming years, the Panel wants higher education to become a natural pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Success in higher education will lay the foundations for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professional class that can contribute to closing the gap and to Australia's broader

wellbeing and economic prosperity. The Panel also wants to see more high-quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers in universities and research agencies contributing to a national research agenda that value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and reflects Aboriginal development priorities.

The Panel ultimately hopes to see the higher education sector playing a leading role in building capacity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and making a meaningful contribution to closing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians (DIISRTE, 2012, p.xi).

The review examined a number of issues and challenges impacting the access and participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian higher education including building professional pathways and responding to community need; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and research; supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff; University culture and sector governance. To ensure that the Review findings and the report's recommendations are effectively considered and actioned the Review Panel proposed that the Australian Government develop an "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education strategy to provide a comprehensive framework for its response to the Review" (p.xv).

Four years on, there is slow progress in the implementation of the review recommendations. All the progressive developments in Aboriginal higher education and the full potential of the recommended actions contained in 'the Review' could be rendered impotent as the Government removes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education outside the Department of Education, away from the wider higher education agenda, risking changes that further constrains the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This potentially will result in a devastating impact on Aboriginal student participation in higher education, a position from which Aboriginal higher education may take years to recover.

the changing face of Australian Aboriginal higher education spaces

Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has always been a complex and contested terrain. From the earliest days of invasion and colonisation, education systems and educators have struggled to design, develop and provide culturally affirming and intellectually enriching education for Australia's Aboriginal peoples. The struggle to create positive learning environments for Aboriginal peoples is captured in Barnhardt (1991) seminal paper *Higher Education in the Fourth World: Aboriginal People Take Control*. Dr Barnhardt's paper provides an excellent analysis of the various attempts by Aboriginal people globally to not only gain access to the dominant 'Western' or non-Aboriginal higher education institutions but to also conceive and build Aboriginal controlled education institutions. Barnhardt chronicles the efforts of Aboriginal peoples to provide higher education opportunities to their people by characterising higher education initiatives into three particular categories: 'Independent Institutions', 'Affiliated Initiatives' and 'Integrated Structures'. It is this final category that best describes Aboriginal higher education initiatives in Australia. Discussing the 'integrated structures' category Barnhardt (1991) writes,

There is yet a third category of institutional configurations for providing Aboriginal higher education services, and that is programs and units contained wholly within and administered by existing mainstream institutions... Either because of a recognition of institutional responsibility or as a result of local

political pressure, these mainstream institutions have responded by establishing units within their structure explicitly dedicated to addressing Aboriginal needs. The most common form these responses have taken is the creation of Aboriginal-oriented academic programs or research/development/service units within the institution, usually in the areas of Native/Indian/Aboriginal studies and/or teacher education (p.172).

Barnhardt (1991) continues highlighting the pivotal issue of ‘commitment to community’ that helps distinguish and define the functions of Aboriginal higher education initiatives, explaining,

One of the most salient and significant characteristics of Aboriginal higher education institutions is their over-arching sense of commitment to the collective interests of the Aboriginal community with which they are associated. This may not seem surprising, since their sponsorship and identity is usually closely tied to the surrounding tribal community, but the priority given to communal development places the Aboriginal institution in a very different posture in relation to their clientele than that of institutions whose primary concern is development of the individual. When Aboriginal people speak of education as a vehicle for ‘empowerment’, they are usually referring to their aspirations as a people, rather than just as individuals (p.199).

Applying Barnhardt’s models of Aboriginal higher education most Australian Aboriginal higher education initiatives can be identified as ‘affiliated and integrated’ structures of academic engagement. Internationally, Aboriginal people have moved beyond the ‘affiliated and integrated’ model and have negotiated and established institutions that can be described as independent and reflective of the principle of Aboriginal self-determination. In recent years various scholars have examined the concept of ‘indigenising the academy’ however it is thought that this model is limited and results in challenges due to the space continuing to be dominated by a western viewpoint (Nakata, 2006) therefore, other options must also be explored. Of course there is no single preferred model and each Aboriginal group will pursue what they consider appropriate to accommodate and respond to their higher education needs and aspirations. However, the literature suggests that there are core characteristics that apply across the various Aboriginal higher education models that currently exist. Again it is instructive to draw upon Barnhardt’s paper in which he views the distinguishing characteristics, allowing for local cultural alignment of Aboriginal higher education, as community responsibility, appropriate leadership, Eldership, spiritual centering, integration of local languages and Indigenous epistemologies (Barnhardt, 1991).

The Wollotuka Institute – a case study

Although there are no independent Aboriginal university’s in Australia, the Wollotuka Institute (Wollotuka), of the University of Newcastle (UoN), aspires to developing systems and structures that ensure a dominant Aboriginal voice in decision making related to Aboriginal higher education. Wollotuka, enjoys what can be best described as a co-dependent relationship with the University. Wollotuka has four operational portfolios inclusive of Indigenous student engagement; Teaching and Learning; Community Engagement and Indigenous Research and Innovation.

In 2013, Wollotuka collaborated with both Aboriginal communities in their immediate footprint and the Nguraki (Elders) Council to develop a set of Cultural Standards that are informed by locally defined Aboriginal values and principles. This initiative was considered critical to guiding the provision of a culturally affirming and intellectually enriching space within the wider western university environment.

The Wollotuka Cultural Standards are imbued with the core principles of, connectedness to country and place, heritage, culture and identity. The Cultural Standards specifically gives effect to the need for

- Respect and Honouring
- Community Responsiveness
- Cultural Celebration
- Academic and Research informed by an Indigenous standpoint
- Positive and Mutually Respectful Inter-Institutional Relationships

The Wollotuka Cultural Standards are designed to enhance and improve the quality of education and learning opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their communities by guiding all the core functions of Wollotuka. The Nguraki Council members have articulated the importance of the Cultural Standards arguing

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culture, in all of its manifestations, is central to and guides the way in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples live their lives. It also defines the way in which we relate to each other as individuals and as nations. Culture and the values and traditions that defines it, has helped to shape the life journey and worldview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples since the dawn of time (Wollotuka, 2013, p.5).

Developing cultural standards to inform the space of Indigenous higher education within a mainstream university presents the opportunity to move beyond a western cultural hegemony. Providing a space that equally privileges Indigenous values, perspectives and knowledges, instead of one that is driven dominantly by the values and philosophies of white superiority. Moreton-Robinson (2004) defines the challenges of this relationship as

Whiteness as an epistemological a priori, provides a way of knowing and being that is predicated on superiority, which becomes normalised and forms part of one's taken for granted knowledge (p.76).

It is only when universities embrace relationships with Indigenous academia based on the principles of reciprocity, accountability and respect, can these conversations move forward. The Cultural Standards engenders principles of shared responsibility and reciprocity and the Board of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Research (BATSIER) an advisory body to the Vice-Chancellor, situates the Aboriginal community so that it engages with the University in a spirit of positive, respectful and mutually rewarding relationships across the broader university.

Wollotuka has moved beyond the enclave model of Aboriginal higher education with 46 all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, delivering expertise across the 'whole of university' academic and professional programs, as well as the provision of strategic advice.

In 2015, Wollotuka offered 29 Indigenous enabling, undergraduate and postgraduate courses, which attracted over 2000 student enrolments. The impact of providing an environment such as that offered by Wollotuka is evident in the highest Indigenous enrolments in the country with approximate 1,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across all discipline areas of the University, including 33 Phd students (UoN, 2016). Further to this, student retention and success rates are above both state and national averages. The access to a culturally strong environment on campus that privileges their own values, principles and knowledges, Wollotuka define, is integral to their success. This is reflected in the following comments from Aboriginal students at the University in a recent study.

Everyone is so welcoming. They are happy to have you and it makes it feel like home. There's good staff, and there's a cultural aspect to it that I find really welcoming.

Definitely feel supported through Wollotuka for sure. I'm still quite independent but it's nice to have input from Wollotuka staff when I need it (University of Newcastle, 2016, p.5).

In 2006, the World Aboriginal Peoples' Conference on Education (WIPCE) was held in Alberta, Canada. It was at this conference where Aboriginal scholars, administrators and community representatives met to discuss Aboriginal higher education issues and concerns. The discussions resulted with the decision to establish the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC). WINHEC has now developed into a highly proficient assembly of Aboriginal academics, community members and allies who have established a number of important policies and programs including the establishment of an accreditation framework to guide Aboriginal higher education institutions and to monitor how they meet identified core Aboriginal higher education standards and objectives. The WINHEC accreditation process assesses the cultural integrity practiced by higher education providers in the pursuit of Aboriginal education and research excellence (WINHEC, 2010).

In 2015, Wollotuka was the first in Australia to receive a ten year international accreditation through WINHEC. The accreditation report stated that Aboriginal students and staff felt Wollotuka was a unique place where they could adopt their own ways of thinking and learning. It was stated that students felt they could maintain their identity within Wollotuka whilst, within the wider university, they were constantly deconstructing and decolonizing white voices and ways of doing, resulting in Wollotuka being a culturally safe environment (WINHEC, 2015). A matrix developed by WINHEC provides Wollotuka with a tool to evaluate all core activities against the Cultural Standards with WINHEC undertaking a five year accreditation progress review. The WINHEC (2015) *Wollotuka Institute Accreditation Site Report*, concluded

Applying the Wollotuka Cultural Standards as the framework, approach, and measuring instrument for our WINHEC Site Visit review, we are pleased to report that these standards are embraced and embedded in the fabric, relationships and experience that is the Wollotuka Institute, so much so that an overall sentiment expressed by students, faculty, staff, and administration was the sense that Wollotuka provided "the Way Home." That sense of home, for Aboriginal/Indigenous people, has to be the truest measure and expression of LIVING cultural standards (p.1).

Toward a new model of Australian Aboriginal higher education

Although there has been great progress in many areas of Aboriginal higher education, the opportunities to claim a space that is congruent with local Aboriginal cultural values and principles whilst navigating a dominant Eurocentric learning environment remains a struggle. Invariably, when Australian universities explore processes to enhance Aboriginal cultural affirmation and integrity they usually adopt a ‘Cultural Awareness or Competency’ approach, an approach that primarily positions Aboriginal peoples as ‘guest’ in the broader university context. The Eurocentric learning and teaching environment promotes and rewards notions of individualism as opposed to Aboriginal concepts of shared collectivism. The model also helps with transitioning Aboriginal university graduates to a position where they embrace mainstream cultural values and principles invariably producing what Maori academic Professor Graham Hingangaroa Smith refers to as ‘privatised academics’, missing the opportunity to produce Aboriginal graduates that will contribute positively to societal change (ABC News, 2009).

The knowledge and skills that are the bounties of successfully participating in higher education are critical to redressing the past and ensuring social justice for the current generation. All Aboriginal cultures are imbued with the principles of collective responsibility and fairness, a commitment to common good rather than common greed. New models of Aboriginal higher education must resist the seductive imperatives of the mainstream and they must be reflective of and responsive to Aboriginal need and aspiration. Aboriginal people who have difficulty with working in such an environment always have the option to pursue a career in mainstream higher education systems. But those who choose to engage with Aboriginal higher education models will do so in the knowledge that their engagement is a commitment to cultural survival and intellectual enrichment. They also engage with a vision of a more just and equitable Australia.

Clearly, Aboriginal people view as critical the attainment of academic skills and knowledge to help transform the social and economic circumstance of their people and their communities. During the past 35 years many great advances have been made and there are ever-increasing numbers of Aboriginal university graduates each year (Department of Education, 2015). Emerging evidence however suggests that there is an urgent need to redefine the paradigm of Australian Aboriginal higher education access and participation so that it mirrors and keeps pace with developments in other Aboriginal contexts. Smith (2007) suggests that Indigenous people move beyond the ‘politics of distraction’, continually responding to Western viewpoints and politics. The alternative he recommends, is that we “become proactive around our own aspirations; to take more autonomous control” (p3).

A paradigm shift is considered important so that it better positions Aboriginal people as partners in higher education not only in terms of governance but also to ensure that Aboriginal students do not feel alienated and that they are welcome in the academy not simply as ‘guests’ but as genuine participants in the pursuit of truth and knowledge. This sense of alienation felt by Aboriginal students in Australian higher education institutions is referenced in the Review. Numerous examples were cited in the review report referring to students continually feeling a sense of alienation and isolation. It was indicated that submissions made suggestions that academic staff complete training in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives. By providing this training it was assumed that the resultant outcome would be the increase of retention and completion rates (DISRTE, 2012, p101).

In its submission to the Review, the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (2012) claimed

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogies (i.e. methods of teaching and learning) and epistemologies (i.e. systems for recognising knowledge) remain at the periphery of academic practice. As a result, universities are in danger of being viewed as non-Aboriginal spaces where the traditional knowledge and cultural practices of students from non-Western background are not valued (p.79).

If a new model of Aboriginal higher education in Australia is to emerge, it must give effect to community self-determination, celebrate Aboriginal knowledge and wisdom, explore and engage other knowledge and technology and be structured to pursue academic and research excellence.

Conclusion

The history of Aboriginal higher education in Australia, as previously argued, has been mostly filled with steady change and transformation however new models must be imagined and devised to reflect developments in other international Aboriginal higher education contexts. Ever since the introduction of 'Enclaves' a core function and operation of Aboriginal higher education centres have been devoted to enhancing the potential for success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education. The challenge to achieving this objective lay with providing a holistic approach that recognises the cultural diversity and values of life experiences that Aboriginal students bring with them when they access higher education. Engaging Aboriginal staff with sound educational qualifications, personal knowledge and experience, coupled with an abiding sense of cultural affirmation. The result is ensuring a positive academic environment that encourages and inspires students to continually grow academically and personally, remaining deeply rooted in their cultural identity.

As new models of Aboriginal higher education evolve during the 21st century the challenge will be to ensure that they remain responsive to Aboriginal cultures and worldview and to guard against the incentive to mainstream. The mainstreaming of higher education centres will inevitably result in the growth of 'privatised' academics. Of course Aboriginal people, as with all peoples, should feel free, as individuals, to decide and pursue their own career pathways and to apply their knowledge, skill and experience to achieving the life goals they set for themselves. But the opening up of higher education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was not simply about creating career options for individuals. There was and still remains the need for social justice, the ongoing need to correct historical wrongs and to hold governments, and society generally to account for the continuing socio-political positioning and marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These social justice imperatives are pivotal to righting historical wrongs.

Existing models of Aboriginal higher education, whether affiliated or integrated, must be allowed to explore and define their own future. Some existing institutions may choose to stay with the status quo and they should be allowed to if that is what they decide however those who choose to redefine their relationship with the academy must also be free to do so. It is not a question of either-or but, rather a question of choice and diversity.

With the emergence of the age of information technology, the changing nature of the labour market and the advent of internationalisation, mainstream higher education institutions are steadily being reshaped and transformed. Aboriginal people must define the nature and scope of Aboriginal higher education, in an ever-changing social and political terrain. Internationally, Aboriginal peoples have negotiated their own higher education institutions and many continue to function with distinction, achieving high levels of academic success. Aboriginal people in Australia deserve and are entitled to no less.

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