

Supporting the Learning Needs of Indigenous Australians in Higher Education: How can they be best achieved?

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Abstract: Indigenous Australians participate in higher education at a rate significantly less than non-Indigenous Australians. This disparity becomes increasingly evident according to the level of study undertaken, with postgraduate study revealing the greatest difference. In response to such disparity, Indigenous units were established and are now common place in Australian universities, with their roles and responsibilities varying from one unit to the next. Some units have failed to evolve from their original enclave formation existing for the sole purpose of providing personal, cultural and academic support to students, whilst other units have flourished into larger departments or schools with additional responsibilities that are inclusive of teaching and research. This paper explores the various roles attributed to Indigenous units whilst arguing the need for all units to support the learning needs of their students through a model that centres on understanding through experience.

Keywords: Indigenous Australian, Higher Education, Support

Introduction

THERE IS A need for Indigenous Australian higher education students to be appropriately supported by those employed in Indigenous units located throughout Australian universities. It will be argued that Indigenous unit staff members need to possess a certain minimum level of qualification relevant to their position. A model that centres on understanding through experience is the focus of this paper. It provides a strategy to ensure that, where appropriate, those personnel staffing Indigenous units have undergone academic journeys that reflect a level of candidature similar to the students. Therefore staff would have developed a level of understanding and knowledge that is beneficial to successfully executing their role.

This paper is based on the findings of a doctoral research inquiry that investigated the experiences of 55 Indigenous postgraduate students. The paper begins by providing an overview of Indigenous units, their history, and the diversity of units in today's environment. The support provided by academic and administrative staff is also examined.

Background

The first reported Indigenous Australian to achieve an undergraduate degree in Australia was the late Charles Perkins in 1966 (Bin-Sallik 1989; Gostin 1996). In 1990 Bin-Sallik pointed out that Indigenous Australian participation in higher education was a recent phenomenon (Rigney 2001). A decade later Weir (2000:x) made a similar statement, but referred more specifically to Indigenous postgraduate students, indicating that 'Indigenous entry into

postgraduate sector of education is a recent event.' Regardless of the cohort, the fact that Indigenous participation in higher education is significantly lower than non-Indigenous Australian participation is undeniable. The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) (2007:3) contends that:

The under-representation of Indigenous people in many facets of university life is unacceptable in a society in which education is essential for successful community participation and national development.

Today, Indigenous Australians participate in higher education at less than half the rate of non-Indigenous Australians (Universities Australia 2008). IHEAC (2008) stipulate that Indigenous Australians complete doctorate qualifications at 0.3 percent, and masters qualifications at 0.6 percent the rate of non-Indigenous Australians. For parity to be achieved these figures should be at least 3 percent. It is further claimed that parity would require the number of Indigenous Australians enrolling in postgraduate studies to triple, and the completions to increase by 600 percent (IHEAC 2008).

Methods

This paper is based on findings that stem from a doctoral research inquiry that sought to investigate the support provided to Indigenous Australian postgraduate students. The research consisted of a qualitative inquiry employing an interpretivist or naturalistic paradigm. Recruitment of participants was undertaken using a snowball sampling technique. All Indigenous units in Australia were contacted and asked to forward information about the research to the Indigenous postgraduate students enrolled in their institution. It was then up to the students to decide whether they would participate in the research and contact the researcher.

For those who did express an interest in the research, a questionnaire outlining 33 questions was administered via email. Fifty-five Indigenous Australians enrolled in postgraduate studies, or who had recently completed postgraduate qualifications, participated in the research. Indigenous Australian postgraduate students are prone to experience significant demands on their time, particularly as many hold senior employment positions and are also likely to have family and community responsibilities (Trudgett 2008). Utilising electronic means to distribute and collect data proved to be a highly valuable resource as it allowed the participants to contribute at a time that best suited them. Once the questionnaire was completed, participants had the option of submitting the complete questionnaire either electronically or through regular post. The majority (70.9%) opted to respond via email.

Some responses provided in the questionnaire were deemed suitable for in-depth exploration, enriching the research with an additional source of data. Where appropriate, participants were contacted and asked to provide clarification or further information relating to the responses provided in the questionnaire. Triangulation was then used to enhance the rigour. This process allowed for the literature, questionnaire and in-depth exploration responses to be compared for consistency (Trudgett 2008).

Indigenous Units played a central role in the research process. They did not only facilitate the snowball sampling process, but also provided the basis for many comments in the data. It is therefore essential that Indigenous units be discussed in some detail.

Indigenous Units in Higher Education

In 1959 William Wentworth submitted a proposal outlining the need for a National Institute of Aboriginal Studies (Nakata 2004). In 1973 the first Indigenous specific program was established within the structure of the Aboriginal Task Force (ATF) program located in the School of Social Studies at the South Australian Institute of Technology (Bin-Sallik 1989, 1993, 2003; Gostin 1996; Rigney 2001). Indigenous scholar Mary-Anne Bin-Sallik (1989:52) described the ATF as ‘the beginning of the creation of Aboriginal tertiary education in Australia.’ The blueprint for Indigenous tertiary education was created through the establishment of the ATF, particularly as it laid down the challenge for other states and territories to follow suit (Bin-Sallik 1989, 1993, 2003).

There is ample evidence indicating that there has been a steady increase in the number of Indigenous Australians participating in higher education since the formation of the ATF in 1973; however, there is considerable discrepancy relating to the number of programs that existed at different periods of time. For instance, according to Whatman (1995) there were 11 Indigenous specific programs functioning by the end of 1984. Yet Bin-Sallik (1989, 1993) contends there were 14 programs in 1984, increasing to 62 programs in 1989. Alternately Gale (1998) maintains that there were 19 programs in 1984, increasing to 58 programs in 1989. Two aspects clearly stand out when examining such literature: firstly, there was a steady increase in the number of higher education programs available to Indigenous Australians; and secondly, the actual number of programs at any given period has not been accurately recorded over time.

By 1995 there was a trend to evolve Indigenous units into Schools for teaching and research. Scholars such as Whatman (1995) developed models that illustrated how such a transition could succeed. However, such models were soon proven to be problematic as their application could not be implemented throughout all universities because Indigenous units differed, each having their own identity and set of responsibilities and functions (Anderson et al. 1998).

Many Indigenous higher education students have, in the past, been dissatisfied in relation to their experiences with Indigenous units. For instance, in 1989 Bin-Sallik conducted research which revealed considerable dissatisfaction, indicating that students in more than 20 of the 36 enclave programs investigated were dissatisfied with the support services they received (Bin-Sallik 1989). Bourke, Burden and Moore conducted a study in 1996, which revealed that one-third of Indigenous higher education students believed university staff displayed poor or negative attitudes; half of the students had not felt welcome at the university; one-third believed the Indigenous contribution and participation in Indigenous related subjects was significantly lacking; and there was consistent agreement amongst students that courses throughout the institutions lacked cultural content and knowledge (Bourke, Burden & Moore 1996).

There is a clear need for Indigenous units to exist as an integral support mechanism for Indigenous students (Trudgett 2008). The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) (2008:2) acknowledged that:

Indigenous centres vary widely in size, budgets, programs, reporting lines within universities, the number of Indigenous academic and professional staff and the extent to which they are engaged in teaching, research and governance... Whatever the model,

Indigenous centres are central to Indigenous leadership and Indigenous education strategies in universities and responsible for core, ongoing service and programs.

Strong differences exist between Indigenous peoples' rights and the control of education. Indigenous Australians are often said to have a right to access all levels of education; however, the right to control our futures in academia are yet to be achieved (Herbert 2002; Rigney 2003). 'Full transition of Indigenous jurisdiction, control and authority over resources, structures and administration in Indigenous education is yet to be realised' (Rigney 2003:76).

The National Indigenous Postgraduate Association Aboriginal Corporation (NIPAAC) (2002) indicates that there is a strong tendency for Indigenous people employed in universities to hold Indigenous identified positions located within Indigenous centres. NIPAAC (2002) further maintains that these staff members choose not to compete for lectureships in other areas of universities. There are several underlying reasons why this could be the case such as the possibility that Indigenous Australians may feel a greater sense of cultural safety when surrounded by other Indigenous Australians. There is also the possibility that the concentrated employment of Indigenous Australians in Indigenous centres could be perceived as a tokenistic gesture by universities that actually incorporate policies that reflect characteristics of both assimilation and segregation. Another reason that could explain why Indigenous staff are often more concentrated in Indigenous Units is because these positions are often 'identified' meaning that only Indigenous Australians can apply for tenure. Hence, the competitiveness of positions in Indigenous Units is often considerably less than most other positions in universities. However, it is extremely important to understand that this does not mean that the standard or qualifications of Indigenous Australians is inferior to non-Indigenous Australians – it simply means that only a small portion (approximately 3%) of the general population are eligible to apply for the positions based on their ancestry.

The dearth of Indigenous academics is extremely problematic. The Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee (2006) claims that almost 700 additional Indigenous Australians employed in teaching and/or research roles would be required in order to achieve parity. This means that, on average, each institution would need to employ an additional 18 Indigenous Australians in academic positions to achieve parity with non-Indigenous Australians.

An increase in the number of Indigenous academics with postgraduate qualifications would also provide Indigenous postgraduate students access to supervisors who understand Indigenous Knowledges and perspectives. Indigenous Knowledges are a vital factor to research that involves Indigenous people as they relate to 'knowledge held collectively by a population, informing interpretation of the world' (Sillitoe, Dixon & Barr 2005:3). This knowledge can be crucial to the support and guidance offered to Indigenous postgraduate students, particularly when the students research area involved Indigenous people, perspectives and culture.

Research Findings

Indigenous units play an integral role in increasing the representation of Indigenous Australians in higher education in terms of both participation and completion. Perhaps one of the greatest objectives for Indigenous centres is to engage with Indigenous students. Yet more than one-third (37%) of the 55 Indigenous postgraduate students who participated in the research indicated that they had never visited the Indigenous unit at their institution (Trudgett

2008). This finding highlights the importance in identifying the needs of Indigenous students and the responsibilities Indigenous Units have in serving these needs.

Academic Support

Participants were asked whether they believed that academic staff in Indigenous units were suitably qualified to assist them with academic matters. Of the total respondents, 49.1% indicated 'yes'; 23.6% stated 'no'; 12.7% failed to provide an answer; and 14.5% responded that they were unsure (Trudgett 2008:157). Similar to the results pertaining to administrative support, approximately half of the participants viewed the Indigenous unit as capable of assisting them with academic matters.

One participant expressed concern about the lack of suitably qualified staff members, whilst also mentioning considerable dissatisfaction with the facilities provided to postgraduate students affiliated with that particular Indigenous unit:

No staff qualified or experienced in supporting PG [postgraduate] researchers, and no alternative mechanism provided in the absence of this service. Whilst the staff are friendly and helpful, the facilities are drab and outdated, room provided for PG [post-graduate] students is not secure, not air conditioned or heated, and has old IT facilities. There is no library or research room set aside for Indigenous researchers [Data sample] (Trudgett 2008:163).

Another interesting point emerging from the data was that many of the participants in the research were actually employed in Indigenous units. When asked if he was supported academically by the Indigenous unit where he was both an employee and a student, one doctoral candidate indicated that he was the only person employed within the Indigenous unit who held a postgraduate qualification. This emphasises the need for Indigenous units to employ more people with postgraduate qualifications so that the academic learning environment for staff pursuing postgraduate qualifications is supportive and nurturing, as opposed to possibly isolating.

Due to the low number of Indigenous academics available, their workloads are often substantial, leaving students often feeling perturbed. When one participant was asked if she believed the academics in her Indigenous unit were able to assist her with academic matters, she explained that those who held appropriate qualifications did not associate with the students:

I found that the administrative staff spent more time with the students than the academic staff. I think the academics just assumed that the students were there to seek support from the student support officer (who is not academic) and the person who organises tutorial support (who is also not academic). I found that 'academic advice' came from a tutor (employed by DEST) and most times this was a non-Aboriginal person, whereas the academic person (during my time of study) was Aboriginal. Therefore I think an Aboriginal academic would have had a more positive effect on an Aboriginal student whether it was for seeking academic advice or just yarning about uni [Data sample] (Trudgett 2008:159).

The problem that emerges then is the fact that administrative staff are providing academic advice. It is often the case that many administrative staff members do not possess any form of academic qualification themselves.

One participant argued that Indigenous postgraduate students should enrol only as mainstream students, avoiding the opportunity to enrol within Indigenous units.

Current Indigenous units are great for undergrads – anyone who goes beyond that needs to mainstream due to lack of academic talent embedded in these [Indigenous] units [Data sample] (Trudgett 2008:164).

It is essential to remember that Indigenous units differ from one to the next. This participant may rightly have reason to feel that Indigenous postgraduate students should avoid undertaking studies with that specific unit – however, this is not the case for all institutions as many participants indicated the staff at their Indigenous unit were most capable.

This paper argues that Indigenous Australian students should be primarily supported by staff members who have undertaken a journey similar to their clientele so that they can understand the requirements, processes, pressures and tasks relevant to the students learning. A reality that must be discussed is the fact that, as a group, Indigenous Australians are in the process of building a solid knowledge base. For example, only 15% of Indigenous Australians employed in academic positions hold a doctoral qualification. This is comparable to 57% of non-Indigenous academics holding a doctoral qualification (IHEAC 2008). This means that in the eyes of the western academy, most Indigenous academics are not able to assist students undertaking a doctoral qualification through roles such as supervision as they fail to meet the institutions standards necessary to supervise doctoral candidates.

Administrative Support

Participants were asked whether they felt confident that staff members in Indigenous units were able to assist them with administration matters. In response, 56.4% said ‘yes’; 14.5% indicated ‘no; 18.2% did not provide a response; and 10.9% stated that they were unsure (Trudgett 2008:157). The level of uncertainty in the responses meant that it was difficult to draw conclusions from the data. However, it is clear that slightly more than half of the participants believed the administrative staff located in Indigenous units were able to assist them.

The quality of assistance provided by some Indigenous units is questionable – “When I emailed a question about finance or academic matters I usually get a shallow and trivial reply. Friendly they are, informative they are not” [Data sample] (Trudgett 2008:163). Another participant, indicated that the support staff at her university were usually not able to assist her and pointed out that the manager of student support held a non-academic position which she found “both odd and unusual” (Trudgett 2008:159). Other participants also voiced their concerns around the qualifications held by student support officers:

Since they brought in specialised student support staff things just have not been the same. Not all the student support staff even have degrees, so how can they understand the problems of uni. As for help, they are fine I would imagine for undergrads but are useless to me in academic matters and administrative matters. I am lucky in that I have

lots of academic friends including Indigenous staff and so have access to people I can talk to. But these are personal friends, not student support [Data sample] (Trudgett 2008:163).

Findings suggest that people employed in student support positions are often not well versed in the academic needs of students, nor the demands that are placed on them (Trudgett 2008). The underpinning essence of this paper is to argue that people occupying positions in Indigenous units, regardless of whether or not they are Indigenous Australians, must have undergone a similar journey so that they can better understand what the student may be encountering from an experiential perspective - hence the term ‘understanding through experience.’

Model of Understanding Through Experience

Table 1 provides an outline of the ideal minimum qualifications of staff employed in Indigenous units. This is not a definitive prescription, but rather a guide on what would be ideal in most circumstances, presented as a model of understanding through experience.

Table 1: Ideal minimum qualifications of staff employed in Indigenous units to ensure a model of understanding through experience

	No Tertiary Qualification	Undergraduate Qualification	Postgraduate Qualification
Academic staff			
Teaching and Research Staff			√
Directors of Indigenous Units			√
Administration staff			
Office Assistant	√		
ITAS Co-ordinator		√	
Student Support Officer			√

(Sourced from data in Trudgett 2008)

Table 1 only provides an outline for the more common positions located in Indigenous units. Other positions are likely to exist, however they would be less common and perhaps more self-explanatory in terms of the ideal minimum requirements i.e. traineeships or post-doctoral fellowships.

The model of understanding through experience refers to two key academic roles – teaching and research, and the directors of Indigenous units. In order for Indigenous units to operate at a level analogous to other departments, it is imperative that staff members hold comparable qualifications. Most importantly, the need for the majority of academic staff members to be competent in undertaking tasks such as overseeing the supervision of post-graduate students and the ability to produce high quality research is necessary to maintain a place within the academy. With exception to some junior teaching positions, it is ideal that all remaining Indigenous unit academic staff members possess postgraduate qualifications.

It is also important that directors of Indigenous Units lead by example and have the necessary skills to provide excellent advice to students and staff. Arguably, first-hand knowledge of postgraduate studies would equip the director with valuable skills to undertake their role within both the department and the wider intellectual academic community.

The model of understanding through experience lists three main areas under the administration section – Office Assistant, Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) Co-ordinator and Student Support Officer. Participants did not refer to the support required from office assistants, nor did they indicate that people holding such positions require a degree to fulfil their job requirements. It is therefore unreasonable to expect that office assistants would hold a degree.

The Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) is a Commonwealth Government initiative that primarily centres on providing tutorial support to Indigenous undergraduate students. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) guidelines stipulate that most Indigenous postgraduate students are not eligible for tutorial assistance.

Postgraduate students should have developed appropriate skills in literacy, numeracy academic writing and research prior to their admission into a postgraduate program. Therefore, applications for ITAS assistance from postgraduate students may be approved in exceptional circumstances only (DEEWR 2008:148).

It is therefore unnecessary for ITAS Co-ordinators to have a solid understanding of the issues postgraduate students face. However, it is imperative that they are well versed in undergraduate issues, particularly as it would assist them to assess students eligibility for tutoring. It is logical to expect that the co-ordinators themselves have first hand knowledge of the academic struggles and processes other undergraduate students are likely to experience.

Student Support Officers play an integral role in providing support to Indigenous higher education students. The number of Student Support Officers in any one institution is usually determined by the number of Indigenous students enrolled within the university. Whilst most institutions tend to have only one person occupying this important role, some Indigenous units may have two or three Support Officers at any period of time. This makes the task of assessing the ideal minimum qualifications for the position somewhat problematic. In units where there is only one Support Officer it is reasonable to specify that postgraduate qualifications would be most appropriate. In cases where there is more than one Support Officer it is important that at least one have postgraduate qualifications, whilst quite reasonable that the others possess an undergraduate qualification. The argument is based on findings of the doctoral inquiry, which indicated that Support Officers are often of assistance to undergraduate students but fail to understand the experiences and needs of postgraduate students (Trudgett 2008). Processes and regulations governing postgraduate candidature are considerably different from that of undergraduate students. Arguably, dedicated Support Officers who do not possess postgraduate qualifications could seek necessary information from other areas in the university; however, they could not fully understand the issues affecting postgraduate students. Such an understanding would provide a valuable resource to the role.

Recommendations

Twenty-six recommendations pertaining to how the Government, universities and Indigenous units could better support Indigenous postgraduate students emerged from the research. The recommendations pertinent to this paper are:

1. Require Indigenous Support Units to employ more Indigenous Australians who possess tertiary qualifications and demonstrated research experience.
2. Ensure that all Indigenous Support Units have an Indigenous Postgraduate Support Officer. This person would be employed specifically to assist Indigenous postgraduate students enrolled within the university.
3. Encourage all Indigenous Support Units to undertake teaching responsibilities beyond bridging programs. This includes the supervision of Indigenous postgraduate students and providing courses to mainstream students.
4. Increase the number of Indigenous academics in Australian universities (Trudgett 2008:241-242).

Conclusion

The findings revealed that there is a need for staff members of Indigenous units to possess a certain minimum level of qualifications in order for them to best serve the needs of Indigenous students in their institution. The functions and responsibilities of Indigenous units continue to evolve with time; hence it is reasonable to expect that the qualifications of staff members also evolve over time. It is imperative that Indigenous Australians are employed across all facets of academic and administrative positions within the Indigenous units – however we need to be mindful that they are suitably qualified. With the current knowledge pool of Indigenous academics growing every year there is no reason why Indigenous units cannot assign qualified Indigenous people to these roles. Hence, the model of understanding through experience provides a guide for the ideal minimum qualifications required for such positions to function effectively.

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