

Advice from Indigenous early career researchers: Indigenous futurity in Australian universities

Rhonda Povey¹, Michelle Trudgett¹, Susan Page¹ and Michelle Locke²

¹ Division of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President Indigenous Leadership, Western Sydney University, New South Wales 2751, Australia, email: R.Povey@westernsydney.edu.au

² School of Education, Western Sydney University, New South Wales 2751, Australia

This paper presents findings from a three-year, longitudinal qualitative study exploring the experiences of Indigenous early career researchers (ECRs) in Australian universities. It investigates the systemic challenges they face and the strategies they employ to build meaningful academic careers within a sector shaped by settler colonialism and racialised structures. Using complexity theory (CT) as a framework, the study highlights how Indigenous ECRs navigate and influence institutional systems, often acting as agents of reform. Participants demonstrate resilience and leadership, advocating for Indigenous equity, curriculum reform and cultural sovereignty. The concept of Indigenous futurity—imagining and enacting futures grounded in Indigenous values—is central to their efforts. Despite persistent barriers, these scholars are reshaping the academic landscape, challenging White futurity and laying foundations for transformative change in higher education.

Keywords: Indigenous, early career researcher, challenges and successes, career development, Indigenous futurism, complexity theory

Introduction

For early career researchers (ECRs), the race of winning opportunities to develop a successful and meaningful academic career in the higher education sector is a highly contested one. The competition is often driven by a culture of impact and brimming with trade-offs that compromise their career narratives (Wróblewska et al., 2023). For Australian Indigenous¹ ECRs, success can be further confounded by the very nature of the landscape itself, as the terrain of the Australian higher education sector is a carefully manicured Whitescape founded on stolen land (Thunig & Jones, 2020), notorious for its hierarchical governance structure (Povey et al., 2022b), grounded in epistemological racism (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016) and racial ignorance, and increasingly imbued with a competitiveness driven by neoliberal and market capital investment approaches to education (Anderson et al., 2020). As such, the terrain is replete with carefully placed rocky ground that overtly and covertly discriminates against Indigenous success (Locke et al., 2021; Povey et al., 2022a).

¹ The term “Indigenous” refers to people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who identify as such and are recognised as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander within their community. We acknowledge the term “Indigenous” is a colonial term and, as such, represents the imposition of language associated with the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism.

In this paper, we look to the participants in our study for their experiences of and insights into the inner working of the sector and ask a most important question about what factors enable Indigenous ECRs to create a successful, meaningful pathway in the competitive and racialised White academy.

To address the question, we mobilise a nuanced consideration of this future. Baldwin understands the future to be “an imagined time that is yet to come” (2012, p. 172), while Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández explain this imagined time in terms of futurity, referring to the ways in which “the future is rendered knowable through specific practices (i.e., calculation, imagination and performance), and, in turn, intervenes upon the present” (2013, p. 173). In other words, futurities are “ways that groups imagine and produce knowledge about futures” (Goodyear-Kaopua, 2019, p. 86). Tuhiwai Smith et al. (2019) remind us that futurity is informed by anticipatory logics, bringing together the present and, by default, the past and the future. As Cole (2024) notes, futurity symbiotically connects what we are doing now with our vision for the future. Importantly, Goodyear-Kaopua argues, “Settler futurity requires containment, removal and eradication of autochthonous people” (2019, p. 86). While settler futurity forecloses Indigenous sovereignty of land, culture, language and education, Indigenous futurity seeks to dispel settler colonialism and settler epistemologies. We propose the tension between settler and Indigenous futurity is played out in universities and that this relationship is complex, particularly in relation to Indigenous academics who have recently completed their formal doctoral accreditation and whose academic careers are influenced and shaped by numerous historical, geographical and contextual factors that impede or enable change in the sector.

Our study shows that a fulcrum for change may very well sit with these Indigenous ECRs, many of whom will become senior leaders and academics committed to leading reform that promotes Indigenous equity and sovereignty, Indigenising curriculum, and supporting Indigenous students (Locke et al., 2021), thereby enabling Indigenous futurity in the sector.

Literature review

Reports specific to improving Indigenous outcomes in universities, such as the *On Stony Ground* report (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011), described an adversarial higher education environment in which Indigenous students and academics struggled to flourish, and where universities resisted responsibility for the pursuit of equity. The Behrendt Report (Behrendt et al., 2012) similarly called for sector-wide accountability and the building of academic pipelines for Indigenous students, postgraduates and ECRs. Universities Australia (2017) initiated Indigenous strategies for Australian higher education, announcing a commitment to advancing Indigenous engagement in the sector, and advocated for the appointment of Indigenous academics into leadership roles. Universities Australia’s *Indigenous Strategy 2020–25* report (Universities Australia, 2022) called for the advancement of Indigenous peoples in and through universities, identifying Universities Australia and universities themselves as playing a key role in advocacy for equity and parity. This report also called for accountability through monitoring and reporting mechanisms, and for an unequivocal stance against racism.

Yet, despite calls for reform to better support Indigenous presence in universities, a comprehensive body of research shows that claims of diversity and affirmative action in the sector have not been enacted, and the sector stubbornly continues to perpetuate unfair outcomes; the work of Ahmed (2006) on the rhetoric of diversity still resonates today. Even considering recent increases in the number of Indigenous PhD completions in Australian universities, from 36 in 2011 to 52 in 2021 (Universities Australia, 2023), a disparity remains in the representation and retention of Indigenous Australians in research training. In

2021, Indigenous students comprised 1.49% of all domestic postgraduate coursework completions and 1.3% of all domestic postgraduate research award completions (Universities Australia, 2023). Similarly, although the number of Indigenous academic staff has doubled between 2005 and 2020, both academic and non-academic staff comprise just 1.3% of Australian university staff, substantially below the working-age population parity figure of 3.1%. Notably, Indigenous academic staff were employed in lower proportions at the levels of senior lecturer and above, compared to non-Indigenous staff (Universities Australia, 2022).

The findings of two Australian recent studies, *Walan Mayini: Indigenous Leadership in Higher Education* and *Indigenous Early Career Researchers*, attest to the slow gyrations of systemic change. The *Walan Mayini* findings shine a spotlight on critical areas and the sector's responsibility to support an Indigenous presence, especially in leadership roles; to encourage long-term career development (Coates et al., 2022); to draw on the broad range of Indigenous leaders' skills, knowledges and purviews; and to ensure Indigenous leaders become integral architects in institutional design (Trudgett et al., 2021). These findings were replicated in the international component of this study, indicating that Indigenous academics and leaders are doing the hard work of enacting reform in the immediate everyday, and for the future (Povey et al., 2024). The Indigenous Early Career Researchers project found that, while Indigenous ECRs are looking to positively shape a productive future for themselves, their communities and for educational sovereignty (Locke et al., 2021), they face challenges of discrimination (Locke et al., 2021; Povey et al., 2022), ambiguous ECR roles that are heavily weighted towards teaching at the cost of developing research profiles, and professional isolation. It is fair to say that, although some progress has been made, the sector appears to remain steadfast in its resolve to cling to its colonial heritage of White epistemological elitism (Elias et al., 2021).

When speaking back to the imagining and enactment of White futurities, as well as the institutional structures built to sustain White futurity, stability becomes an overriding value. Baldwin (2012) underscores the importance of challenging how the future is invoked in racist social imaginaries that privilege Whiteness, White identity and White power constructs, thereby unsettling this stability. For Indigenous ECRs in Australian universities, the question, as Ahmed has noted, is how to move forward from "here" (2021, p. 151). Shahjahan and Edwards (2022) argue that Whiteness produces and shuts down Indigenous aspirations, but, as Indigenous ECRs inhabit the increasingly contested space of settler and Indigenous futurities, their skills, aspirations and visions of the future are located at a fulcrum for change that challenges settler futurities.

Methodology and method

Theoretical framework

In this paper, we posit the Australian higher education sector can be described as one that is characterised by White futurity, enabled by slow gyrations of reform in pursuit of equity and parity in Indigenous higher education. We also contend the sector is contested by Indigenous ECRs looking to assume their rightful place as current and future leaders of learning, and to centre Indigenous sovereignty as well as Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing (Locke et al., 2021). Within this context, an adaptive and inclusive theoretical framework is called for to better understand the tensions, hurdles and successes Indigenous ECRs encounter in their academic progression.

Complexity theory (CT) is the theoretical framework underpinning this paper. Its application is inspired by international and national research using CT to investigate the integration of Indigenous knowledges, the study into Alaskan Native education by Barnhardt and Kawagley (1998) being most notable. Currently, CT is also gaining traction in Australia in the fields of Indigenous education on curriculum reconciliation (Kennedy et al., 2019); policies on First Nations boarding schools (Guenther et al., 2020); attendance, retention and successes for Indigenous students in Australian remote education systems (Bat & Guenther, 2013); Indigenous data analysis for research (Yunkaporta & Moodie, 2021); achieving improvements in Indigenous health and education in western New South Wales (Jarvie & Stewart, 2011); and managing complex challenges in complex social and cultural contexts (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2017).

CT can be defined as a theory of change, evolution and adaptation; it involves the study of complex systems whose numerous interactive components act together making their sum greater than their parts (Morrison, 2006). It breaks with straightforward cause-and-effect models that rely on linear predictability and carry a reductionist approach to understanding phenomena. These models are replaced with organic, non-linear and holistic approaches, in which relations within interconnected networks are the order of the day (Begun et al., 2003; Snyder, 2013). The appeal of CT lies in its ability to explore the way new properties emerge from the elements of a system, and also from the interactions of these elements. By using CT to analyse this complex adaptive system, we can shine a light on Indigenous ECRs' various interactions with higher education, see how they themselves are influenced by the system and, most importantly, understand how they are manipulating the system in various ways to enable reform in the sector.

As a theoretical framework, CT offers many opportunities to understand the nuances of our findings and to generate a culturally rich discussion on ethical and sustainable reform to the Whitespace of the Australian higher education sector. By resisting simple, linear, prototypical solutions, CT counters tendencies to homogenise Indigenous peoples and stands in opposition to deficit representations of Indigeneity. Because CT concerns itself with the whole, its components and the relationships of each part to the whole (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 1998), the paradigm is consistent with complex adaptive systems of Indigenous worldviews that reflect Indigenous ways of valuing, being, knowing and doing (Cajete, 1999; Lythberg et al., 2021; K. Martin, 2008; Yunkaporta & Moodie, 2021).

Research design and analysis

This study, underpinned by the notion of emancipatory Indigenist research, is founded on the three principles of resistance as an emancipatory imperative (self-determination), political integrity in Indigenous research (research led by or authorised by Indigenous peoples) and privileging Indigenous voices (informed by Indigenous peoples) (Rigney, 1999). These Indigenist research methodologies reference a research paradigm that respects and honours Indigenous epistemologies, ontology and axiology. Throughout this paper, Indigenous voices and scholarship are deliberately centred as an agential response to the historical dominance of Eurocentric ideologies in academic discourse (Kovach, 2009). Indigenous voices are further centred as three authors of this paper are Indigenous Australian academics: authors two and three hold senior leadership roles in an Australian university and the fourth author holds a senior lecturer role. The first author is a non-Indigenous ally who completed her doctoral research under the supervision of authors two and three and currently works in research in the field of Indigenous ECRs' professional development.

A total of 30 Indigenous ECRs participated in Stage One interviews (held in 2020) and 28 of these people participated in Stage Two (held in 2021) and Stage Three (held in 2022) interviews. In 2021, two participants were unable to participate due to personal health reasons, and, because this paper is a longitudinal analysis of data, we have not included data from these participants in this paper. The demographic distribution of the participants is diverse. The participants represent at least 35 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations, employed in 21 universities across Australia at the time of writing, and working across a range of faculties (Locke et al., 2021). The original Indigenous ECR cohort were sourced from institutions across Australia, which included 12 Indigenous ECRs located in New South Wales, 10 in Queensland, and two each in Victoria, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

Though all are classified as being an ECR, the participants are of different ages, in different stages of their career development, at different academic levels and in different roles – a situation not uncommon for Indigenous academics. At the commencement of the project in 2020, there was an equal number of first year ECRs across three different age brackets represented in the study sample, being 30–39, 40–49 and 50–59 years old. As further examples of demographic diversity, 73% of the total number of participants have been employed in higher education for more than six years, and, at the time of writing, 28% are in senior roles of associate professor, director or an executive position (Povey et al., 2022a). Fourteen were first-year ECRs and seven were in their second year. Thus, 70% of participants were within the first two years of the five-year ECR phase. Interestingly, 13 were employed in the higher education sector between 11 and 13 years, nine for 6 to 8 years and eight from 1 to 5 years. However, 17 were employed at academic Level B with only 10 at academic Level C (Locke et al., 2024). The significance of this diversity became an important part of our findings.

Data analysis

Interviews were conducted over a three-year period, with the first round commencing in 2020. The longitudinal approach was employed to enable rich and meaningful responses that would facilitate the mapping of changes and developments in the participants' perspectives and experiences. We ensured interviews were conducted with respect for protocols of ethical research, as previous colonial relationships persist within institutional centres such as research spaces, which leaves a vestige of mistrust among Indigenous peoples. All participants were de-identified by choosing a pseudonym and were assured of their anonymity in all publications. De-identification supports the moral imperative of the study “to do no harm” by protecting participants' privacy and intellectual property rights (Povey & Trudgett, 2019).

The initial phase of data analysis involved the first author systematically coding each participant's interview responses across all three rounds of data collection. This coding focused on identifying recurring challenges, which were categorised under the broad heading of “problems/issues”. In the secondary phase, these issues were grouped into thematic categories, such as workload distribution, Indigenous leadership and promotion pathways. This thematic coding enabled the research team to track the resolution status of each concern over time, providing insight into both persistent and evolving challenges. To enrich the analysis, demographic data for each participant was visually mapped using sidebars. This included variables such as interview round, age, years of experience in the higher education sector and duration as an early career researcher. The integration of demographic and thematic data allowed for a nuanced understanding of how individual contexts shaped participants' experiences and responses to systemic barriers.

Findings

How Indigenous ECRs are building Indigenous futurity

Findings from our study indicate that a complex web of factors influence and shape Indigenous ECRs' prospects of building a meaningful academic career; these factors are many and varied, ranging from institutional purview to individual agency. Therefore, the following section is a distillation of the data, homing in on the tensions that arise within the teaching–promotion dynamic Indigenous ECRs encounter, growing Indigenous faculty through leadership and planning for succession. Finally, four participants outline how they are standing firm, speaking back and being heard.

The push-me–pull-you of teaching

Data collected by Universities Australia (2020) shows an increase in teaching-only roles for Indigenous academics, from 5.6% in 2005 to 14.1% in 2018. Across the 28 Indigenous ECR participants in the study, nine different workload allocations were recorded, demonstrating significant inconsistencies in the research, teaching and service/community expectations for this Indigenous ECR cohort. It is worth noting that five participants have teaching loads of 50% or more (Locke et al., 2021). This data is most significant because, of the 28 participants, 15 (54%) identified teaching as problematical. Within this cohort, eight of the 15 participants (53%) were able to partially remediate their concerns, while seven of the 15 of the participants (47%) identified teaching as an ongoing and unresolved issue. That is to say, 25% of participants in the study identified teaching as fraught with challenges, a perspective reflected in national and international research (Harris et al., 2017; Locke et al., 2021; G. Martin et al., 2017; Stanley, 2006; Thunig & Jones, 2020). The 47% of participants who identified their teaching roles as problematical were unable to find any resolve over the three years of the study, despite spanning a variety of contexts, differential years of experience in the sector, seniority, age at commencement of ECR journey and gender. Reasons cited for dissatisfaction include precarity and homogenisation in faculty-led Indigenous Studies courses (James), racist feedback from students (Eva), onerous weight carried by Indigenous ECRs teaching emotionally triggering content (Susan), being pigeon-holed into Indigenous-content-only courses (Eva and Lee), and heavy Indigenous-led teaching loads attributed to lack of parity in the sector (Julie) (see also Povey et al., 2022). Furthermore, “high levels of teaching/support rarely count in terms of promotion and also divert time from the sort of achievements that will count—like publications”, which was a concern raised by Jessie, William, Lee and Patricia. The above data highlights the complexity of Indigenous ECRs' experiences in the sector, with Indigenous ECRs identifying the various impediments to developing a satisfying and meaningful academic career. Participants explain how they are being negatively positioned by work allowances as well as a hostile work environment, and make transparent a number of differing factors contributing to this inequity.

William pleads for sense to prevail. As a mature-age academic in their second year as an ECR, William advocates for self-determination in the workplace, through control over his purview:

The [research] work—it has been identified as nationally significant, and yet they want me to teach a [expletive] first-year course. I mean, in the end, I know it's important, but there's people who could do that work, but there's few who can do the work that I'm doing. So, why not let me just do the work.

Three years in, and one year later, William considers the impact of decisions about his career trajectory that are based on the university's budget and measurable outcomes:

There's not much fat left in the budget, so they've got to make — they are going to have to make a political and, yeah, economic decision, I guess, about the value of the work and whether they see a value accruing over time that outweighs me teaching.

It is worth noting that six participants who were dissatisfied with their teaching allocation had extensive experience in the sector prior to completing a PhD (from five to 22 years), and yet their continuing employment involved the continuation of predominantly teaching roles. Susan suggested that a primary reason for undertaking a PhD was to be able to move beyond their two decades of teaching and progress into research, the likelihood suggested by the term “early career research”.

Nevertheless, among the 18 participants who identified teaching roles as challenging in their first year as an ECR, six were then able to move from the front of the room into research positions by winning research grants, or through promotion to positions where they felt they could best achieve their goals to support Indigenous-based and Indigenous-led research. It is certainly understandable that an ECR might hope to continue to move into a funded research role, especially given the position title. It is also certainly understandable that ECRs might look to promotion as a means to effect change and/or seek independent grant funding so as to engage in research, mostly drawn from or related to the focus of their PhD. One example of this is seen in Eli's responses. Through promotion after nine years in the sector, Eli was able to realign their position to mostly research “so as to make most of academic service and leadership” and then progress to a research-only role in the following year. In the first round of interviews, Eli declared an ambition to become a faculty dean; in the second round of interviews, Eli was more aware of the bureaucratic entanglements and “aware of the bullshit”; by the third year of interviews, Eli declared they wanted “Indigenous Studies in all faculties”, a goal perceived to be more achievable from the position of dean. Similarly, in the second round, Leila looked for promotion “to get in there and call shots” and to challenge deficit perceptions, aiming to develop “networking and skill-building amongst other Indigenous scholars and across campuses”. For Marie, their promotion meant an enhanced ability “to advocate for Indigenous academic progress” and to enable visibility of Indigenous ECRs' unseen work. To this end, in the second round of interviews, Marie felt “well supported in this by systems and people” and, in the following year, vouched for the support of an “amazing team”. These responses suggest that some participants are able, over time and in their particular institution, to exert themselves as self-referential actors, who can manipulate certain aspects of their work environment, changing the landscape of their purview and influencing the shape of their relationships with the sector. As CT suggests, over time, new properties may emerge from the elements of a system, and the participants cited here have been able to manipulate the system in various ways to enable reform in the sector.

Nevertheless, Mica offered the following against entrapment in the hierarchical sector, offering advice gained from experience:

Go slowly and you can be ambitious but make sure you've got the credibility and the knowledge to progress through the academic ranks. What I see a lot of our mob do is go from finishing their PhD to two years later, they're a professor. I think that's unfair on the person and it's actually just meeting an institutional need to, on paper, have more Indigenous professors to get more money. That's basically what it boils down to. They're using our bodies and our intellect and our connections to get more money essentially.

This statement speaks against virtue signalling within the sector. It calls for the sector to adhere to Indigenous principles of resistance as an emancipatory imperative (Rigney, 1999) and also calls for

Indigenous academics in all institutions to develop a self-determining presence that affords respect for their Indigeneity, and without exploitation.

Growing leadership and Indigenous faculty

The impact of strong and empowered Indigenous leadership in the sector was confirmed by the Indigenous ECRs in our study. It is significant that participants commented that the issue of sufficient numbers of Indigenous leaders in sustainable roles does not lay with the leaders themselves, but that the problem sits outside the university and therefore needs macro reform. Jessie advocated for similar macro level reform after “seeing the workload of those who want to get ahead” and calling for support from “unions, Universities Australia – support top, bottom and on all sides”. In the first round of interviews, Henry, who had been in the sector for 22 years and was in their second year as an ECR, considers “the core business of universities to be Indigenous support”, but described the type of support they had experienced as an ECR as being “neither systemic or institutional”. In the third round, Patricia shared a poignant observation when noticing the attrition of Indigenous ECRs by attributing this high turn-over to a lack of institutional support.

Nevertheless, some participants’ experiences with Indigenous leadership were positive, albeit at times a long time coming. Patricia commented that, with an Indigenous senior leader and associated strategies in place, they felt “safe and supported”. Similarly, in the third round, after 12 years in the sector and having completed their internship as an ECR, William finally felt supported by the strong leadership of an Indigenous associate dean.

Our participants viewed growing and supporting Indigenous faculty, specifically through the strategic implementation of ECR development plans, as an essential prerequisite for the development and sustenance of a meaningful academic career. In our study, 29% of participants who had extensive experience in the sector prioritised a call for embedded Indigenous ECR plans. Mica argues that current Indigenous ECR development plans remain ad hoc, and Patricia describes these plans as being disingenuous and often characterised by “lip service”. As an alternative, Skywalker posits, “university-wide plans that don’t isolate or confine [typecast]” Indigenous ECRs are needed across the higher education sector. Hannah suggests these need to be “context driven” and tailored to suit the needs of the ECRs themselves.

Nevertheless, Areau reiterates across the three interviews that such recommendations all exist within the context of “not enough Indigenous academics”. As shown in the Walan Mayini study, lack of parity undermines attempts to strengthen and influence Indigenous presence in the sector (Povey et al., 2024), thereby constraining both real and visionary development of Indigenous futurity. Brayboy (2015) proffers futurity-based succession planning as a remedial strategy that holds land and leadership safe for the future. Succession planning, as explained by Kimberley in the first round of interviews, can be best achieved by “look[ing] for opportunities” and, as in the example given by Sasha, seeking out those who yield power and who will advocate for Indigenous ECRs’ advancement. Taking a different tack, William recommends building an Indigenous ECR community across institutions to enable collaboration among trusted colleagues. In a similar vein, in the third round of interviews, Areau drew on their 22 years of experience in the sector, recognising that the “colonising machine needs a collective response”, and advocated for the creation of an Indigenous ECR “collective legacy, through research, writing and policy work”. While this response might be seen as “invisible work”, Areau proposes this to be an effective strategy to achieve futurity.

Participants' responses can be characterised as calls for Indigenous futurity, specifically naming sufficient numbers of Indigenous leaders in sustainable roles to support Indigenous ECRs, strategic implementation of ECR development plans, and improved parity and succession planning as strategies that will support and not undermine their development of meaningful academic careers. Most important is the concept of context-driven reform, which comes with the recognition that each context is unique and shaped by its past and present circumstances. Despite their differing experiences, contexts and time spent in the sector, these Indigenous ECRs share a commitment to building sovereignty through Indigenous leadership and the development of parity in the sector, thereby influencing the texture of institutions and increasing their own agency.

Standing firm, speaking back, being heard

Four participants, from differing academic levels, number of years as an ECR, age and gender, offered the following personalised advice on how to overcome the challenges embedded in augmenting Indigenous futurity in the Whitescaped terrain of the higher education sector.

Mica advises Indigenous ECRs to seek support from Indigenous colleagues as opposed to non-Indigenous leaders, arguing the head of school may very well have a different worldview and values system. In a nutshell, Mica advises Indigenous ECRs to "circumvent and go around barriers". Knowing how to navigate and influence at the right time is also deemed strategically important by Hannah, who stated in the first round of interviews, "Just do it". By the second year of the study, they had understood the requisite to "focus on academic trajectory" and to "develop an implementation plan". Strategically, they moved to a more central location, a tactical ploy to "become more visible". In the early stages of their ECR career development, Patricia realised they needed a "strong supervisor mentor, like [I] had as a PhD candidate". However, by the third year, Patricia had changed their approach when the organisational unit relinquished any support, and went on to "find [my] own way and as a self-advocate", a strategy they found to be expedient and successful.

Sasha outlined a further level of complexity to the obstacles Indigenous ECRs encounter when seeking promotion, identifying not having ready access to the hidden White cultural knowledge needed for promotion and grants as being problematic. In the first year as an ECR, Sasha realised:

I really keenly would like a mentor, I'd like someone who's been at the university a long time so that understands how things work here. I need a white person and a woman to tell me how to negotiate these spaces.

Sasha then shared a few of their secrets for success. In their first year, they learnt to mitigate against racist deficit assumptions – a significant burden, whereby the participant speaks about having "to mitigate" as if it is reasonable.

I feel an overwhelming sense that it's my job to represent all Aboriginal people. If I don't do my best job and if I turn up late to a meeting, they're going to assume all Aboriginal people turn up late. If I get sick, all Aboriginal people are sick. If my office is messy then all Aboriginal people are messy.

Further to this, Sasha said:

Yeah. I try to mitigate the things that they throw against me. It doesn't seem to stop it, but I try to mitigate it, I try to be on the forefront. I always make sure my marks are the first ones in.

In the second year of interviews, Sasha declared:

My finger is in all your pies, and if I'm going to do the work, I'm going to make sure it's visible, and I'm going to make sure my colleagues' works are visible.

And in the third year, Sasha advocates for sovereignty:

I think it's about people feeling—for black fellas, like being Indigenous people, it's about showing that they belong. You do own your space. This is your space. Don't let anyone ever tell you this isn't your space ... They weren't created for anyone other than white men. However, university spaces are on Indigenous land. We're entitled to that space as anyone else ... and while we keep holding that mandate that university spaces aren't our spaces we're actually empowering the colonial project.

In response to contextual constraints and often borne from frustration, the above four ECRs have shared their personal journeys. These narratives articulate purposeful strategic actions and are told with strong voices and a distinctive presence. These narratives make transparent the uniqueness of their experiences and the navigational complexity of the Indigenous ECR path. The narratives also reflect the dynamic relationships between actors and their environment in changing each other (Battram, 1999). Here it is not only the Indigenous ECRs who are empowering themselves, the institution itself is resultantly repositioned to accommodate their evolving presence in the sector.

Discussion

How to move forward from here

In this paper, we have sought answers to the question about what factors enable Indigenous ECRs to create successful, meaningful pathways in a competitive and racialised sector. Over a three-year period, we interviewed 28 Indigenous ECRs with different number of years' experience in the sector and time spent as an ECR, and of different ages and genders, and who were working in different faculties and in a variety of rural and city-based institutions across Australia. The resultant matrix is rich in diversity and complexity, defying neat categorisation and the homogenisation of Indigenous ECRs and their experiences. The following discussion highlights the risks of linear and binary thinking in response to the complex political, social and historical issues ensconced in colonisation of Indigenous peoples' country, language, culture and education.

By returning to our theoretical paradigm of CT, we are able to discern emergent (and encouraging) patterns within this diverse and complex matrix. The response to our question is propitious, as research suggests trying to isolate and measure the salience of any specific property alters the whole complex web of connections among the constituent factors, as well as the influence of that factor. Mason (2008) argues that new properties and behaviours emerge not only from the elements that constitute a system, but from the myriad connections among them. A significant finding of our study is that, across the diverse cohort and in a significant number of institutions, the participants have described change to the landscape of their institutions—be it in the dynamic of teaching–promotion relationships, growing Indigenous faculty through leadership and succession planning, or individualised response to specific contextual constraints—thereby giving voice to an emergent push for change across the matrix of an Indigenous ECR presence in the sector.

A significant additional factor is that complex change is componential, differentially impacting and contextually dependent (Pocklington & Wallace, 2014). In order to effect change for themselves, for peers/colleagues, and for future students and academics, our participants variously reported individualised responses to their contexts, such as diversifying their assigned teaching, gaining promotion, strategising to mitigate against racist assumptions, ensuring visibility and transparency, gaining ready access to the hidden White cultural knowledge, knowing how to navigate and influence at the right time, seeking support from Indigenous colleagues, effecting self-advocation, speaking up to be heard, and pursuing context-driven leadership. As is evidenced in our study, we recognise the behaviours of participants are shaped by imposed external forces, and, simultaneously, we recognise that the participants have positioned themselves as being self-referential actors who shape their own behaviours, a tenant of CT espoused by Teisman et al. (2009). Most notable is that Indigenous ECRs in all their diverse demographics and across a range of contexts have successfully challenged the racist structures across the sector, confirming the significance of contextually contingent responses.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the multifaceted and context-dependent factors that shape Indigenous ECRs' ability to forge meaningful academic careers within the Australian higher education sector. Through longitudinal engagement with 28 Indigenous ECRs across diverse institutions, disciplines and career stages, we have uncovered a complex matrix of challenges and strategies that defy simplistic categorisation. Using complexity theory as our analytical lens, we observed that Indigenous ECRs are not passive recipients of institutional conditions, but active agents of change. Their responses – ranging from strategic navigation of teaching and promotion pathways to building Indigenous leadership and advocating for systemic reform – demonstrate adaptive, contextually grounded approaches to resisting the constraints of White futurity and advancing Indigenous sovereignty. The findings underscore that meaningful progress requires more than individual resilience; it demands structural transformation. Supportive Indigenous leadership, genuine institutional accountability and context-driven development plans are critical enablers of Indigenous futurity. Participants in this study are not merely surviving within the academy; they are reimagining it. Their visions challenge the colonial foundations of higher education and offer pathways toward ethical, inclusive and sustainable futures. Ultimately, this research affirms that Indigenous ECRs are reshaping the academic landscape. Their work resists the foreclosure of Indigenous futures and asserts a rightful presence in university spaces – spaces that exist on Indigenous land and that must reflect Indigenous values. The sector must now respond with integrity, ensuring that Indigenous futurity is not only imagined but enacted.

Acknowledgements

The study was approved by Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee: Approval Number HR13270. We would like to thank the Indigenous ECRs who participated in this research. We would also like to thank the Australian Research Council for funding this study (IN190100018).

References

- Ahmed, S. (2006). Doing diversity work in higher education. *Educational Theory and Philosophy*, 38(6), 745–768. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2006.00228.x>

- Ahmed, S. (2021). A phenomenology of Whiteness. In L. Laubscher, D. Hook & M. U. Desai (Eds.), *Fanon, phenomenology and psychology* (pp. 229–246). Routledge.
- Anderson, L., Gatwiri, K., & Townsend-Cross, M. (2020). Battling the “headwinds”: The experiences of minoritised academics in the neoliberal Australian university. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 33(9), 939–953. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1693068>
- Baldwin, A. (2012). Whiteness and futurity: Towards a research agenda. *Progress in Human Geography*, 36(2), 172–187. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325114146>
- Barnhardt, R., & Kawagley, A. O. (1998). *Culture, chaos and complexity: Catalysts for change in Indigenous education*. Alaska University.
- Bat, M., & Guenther, J. (2013). Red dirt thinking on education: A people-based system. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 42(2), 123–135. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2013.20>
- Batram, A. (1999). *Navigating complexity: The essential guide to complexity theory in business and management*. Spiro Press.
- Begun, J. W., Zimmerman, B., & Dooley, K. (2003). Health care organizations as complex adaptive systems. In S. M. Mick & M. Wyttenbach (Eds.), *Advances in health care organization theory* (pp. 253–288). Jossey-Bass.
- Behrendt, L., Larkin, S., Griew, R., & Kelly, P. (2012). *Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: Final report*. Australian Government, Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education. <https://www.education.gov.au/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-higher-education/review-higher-education-access-and-outcomes-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people>
- Bodkin-Andrews, G., & Carlson, B. (2016). The legacy of racism and Indigenous Australian identity within education. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 19(4), 784–807. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2014.969224>
- Brayboy, B. M. J. (2015). Views on Indigenous leadership. In R. Minthorn & A. Chavez (Eds.), *Indigenous leadership in higher education* (pp. 49–59). Routledge.
- Cajete, G. (1999). *Native science: Natural laws of interdependence*. Clear Light Publishers.
- Coates, S. K., Trudgett, M., & Page, S. (2022). Ain’t no mountain high enough: Aspirations of Indigenous academics within the academy. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 28(5), 1139–1153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2022.2068186>
- Cole, A. (2024). Transformative school leadership that privileges the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australian education. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 53(2). <https://doi.org/10.55146/ajie.v53i2.1098>
- Elias, A., Mansouri, F., & Paradies, Y. (2021). *Racism in Australia today*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Goodyear-Kaopua, N. (2019). Indigenous oceanic futures: Challenging settler colonialisms and militarization. In L. Tuhiwai Smith, E. Tuck & K. W. Yang (Eds.), *Indigenising and decolonising studies in education: Mapping the long view* (pp. 82–103). Routledge.
- Guenther, J., Benveniste, T., Redman-MacLaren, M., Mander, D., McCalman, J., O’Bryan, M., Osborne, S., & Stewart, R. (2020). Thinking with theory as a policy evaluation tool: The case of boarding schools for remote First Nations students. *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, 20(1), 34–52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1035719X209050>
- Harris, M., Sellers, S. L., Clerge, O., & Gooding Jr, F. W. (2017). *Stories from the front of the room: How higher education faculty of color overcome challenges and thrive in the academy*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Jarvie, W., & Stewart, J. (2011). Working with complexity: Community engagement and the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial 2002–2007. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 70(3), 259–274. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8500.2011.00734.x>

- Kennedy, J., Thomas, L., Percy, A., Dean, B., Delahunty, J., Harden-Thew, K., & de Laat, M. (2019). An Aboriginal way towards curriculum reconciliation. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 24(2), 148–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2019.1593172>
- Kovach, M (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: characteristics, conversations and contexts*. University of Toronto Press.
- Locke, M. L., Trudgett, M., & Page, S. (2021). Indigenous early career researchers: Creating pearls in the academy. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 50, 237–253. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00485-1>
- Locke, M. L., Trudgett, M., & Page, S. (2022). Beyond the doctorate: Exploring Indigenous early career research trajectories. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 51(1). <https://doi.org/10.55146/ajie.2022.13>
- Locke, M. L., Trudgett, M., & Page, S. (2024). All hands on deck: Coordinated approaches to Indigenous early career development. *International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 15(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2024.15.2.15182>
- Lythberg, B., Newth, J., & Woods, C. (2021). Engaging complexity theory to explore partnership structures: Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi as a structural attractor for social innovation in Aotearoa-New Zealand. *Social Enterprise Journal*, 18(2), 271–287. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-12-2020-0131>
- Martin, G., Nakata, V., Nakata, M., & Day, A. (2017). Promoting the persistence of Indigenous students through teaching at the cultural interface. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(7), 1158–1173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1083001>
- Martin, K. (2008). *Please knock before you enter: Aboriginal regulation of outsiders and the implications for researchers*. Post Pressed.
- Mason, M. (2008). What is complexity theory and what are its implications for educational change? *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 40(1), 35–49. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00413.x>
- Moreton-Robinson, A., Walter, M., Singh, D., & Kimber, M. (2011). *On stony ground: Governance and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in Australian universities: Report to the review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*. Australian Government, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.
- Morrison, K. (2006, November). Complexity theory and education. In *APERA Conference, Hong Kong* (pp. 28–30).
- Page, S., & Asmar, C. (2008). Beneath the teaching iceberg: Exposing the hidden support dimensions of Indigenous academic work. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 37(S1), 109–117.
- Pocklington, K., & Wallace, M. (2014). *Managing complex educational change: Large scale reorganisation of schools*. Routledge.
- Povey, R., & Trudgett, M. (2019). When camp dogs run over maps: “Proper-way” research in an Aboriginal community in the north-east of Western Australia. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, (2), 61–72.
- Povey, R., Trudgett, M., Page, S., & Coates, S. K. (2024). Workers united: A non-assimilatory approach to Indigenous leadership in higher education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 37(10), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2024.2342702>
- Povey, R., Trudgett, M., Page, S., & Locke, M. L. (2022a). Hidden in plain view: Indigenous early career researchers’ experiences and perceptions of racism in Australian universities. *Critical Studies in Education*, 64(4), 355–373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2022.2159469>
- Povey, R., Trudgett, M., Page, S., Locke, M. L., & Harry, M. (2022b). Raising an Indigenous academic community: A strength-based approach to Indigenous early career mentoring in higher education. *Australian Education Researcher*, 50. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00542-3>

- Rigney, L.-I. (1999). Internationalization of an Indigenous anticolonial cultural critique of research methodologies: A guide to Indigenist research methodology and its principles. *Wicazo Sa Review*, 14(2), 109–121. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1409555>
- Shahjahan, R. A., & Edwards, K. T. (2022). Whiteness as futurity and globalization of higher education. *Higher Education*, 83(4), 747–764. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00702-x>
- Snyder, S. (2013). *The simple, the complicated and the complex: Educational reform through the lens of complexity theory*. OECD education working papers no. 96. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/5k3txnpt1lnr-en>
- Stanley, C. (2006). Coloring the academic landscape: Faculty of color breaking the silence in predominantly White colleges and universities. *American Educational Research Journal*, 43(4), 701–736. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312043004701>
- Stronger Smarter Institute. (2017). *Implementing the Stronger Smarter Approach: A comprehensive reflection of the characteristics of a Stronger Smarter Approach in action*. https://strongersmarter.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/PUB_Stronger-Smarter-Approach-2017_final-3.pdf
- Teisman, G., Gerrits, L., & van Buuren, A. (2009). An introduction to understanding and managing complex process systems. In G. Teisman, A. van Buuren & L. Gerrits (Eds.), *Managing complex governance systems* (pp. 1–16). Routledge.
- Thunig, A., & Jones, T. (2020). “Don’t make me play house-n***er”: Indigenous academic women treated as “black performer” within higher education. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 48, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00405-9>
- Trudgett, M., Page, S., & Coates, S. K. (2021). Great expectations: Senior Indigenous leadership positions in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 44(1), 90–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2021.2003013>
- Tuck, E., & Gaztambide-Fernández, R. A. (2013). Curriculum, replacement and settler futurity. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 29(1), 72–89. <https://doi.org/10.63997/jct.v29i1.411>
- Tuhiwai Smith, L., Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2019). Introduction. In L. Tuhiwai Smith, E. Tuck & K. W. Yang (Eds.), *Indigenising and decolonising studies in education: Mapping the long view* (pp. 1–23). Routledge.
- Universities Australia. (2017). *Universities Australia Indigenous strategy: First annual report*. <https://apo.org.au/node/277216>
- Universities Australia. (2020). *2020 higher education facts and figures*. <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/200917-HE-Facts-and-Figures-2020.pdf>
- Universities Australia. (2022). *Indigenous strategy 2022–2025*. <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/publication/indigenous-strategy-2022-25/>
- Universities Australia. (2023). *Universities Australia Indigenous strategy annual report*. <https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/UA-2023-Indigenous-Strategy-Report.pdf>
- Wróblewska, M. N., Balaban, C., Derrick, G., & Benneworth, P. (2023). The conflict of impact for early career researchers planning for a future in the academy. *Research Evaluation*, 33, Article rvad024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvad024>
- Yunkaporta, T., & Moodie, D. (2021). Thought ritual: An Indigenous data analysis method for research. In T. McKenna, D. Moodie & P. Onesta (Eds.), *Indigenous knowledges: Privileging our voices* (pp. 87–96). Brill.

About the authors

Dr Rhonda Povey is a non-Indigenous researcher, living and working on Dharug Country. She has extensive experience working and researching in the field of Indigenous education. Rhonda's place-based thesis, *The Proper-bad Lie: Aboriginal Responses to Western Education at Moola Bulla, 1910–1955*, focused on rewriting colonial history of Aboriginal education in remote Australia and was well received with a commendation for the Chancellor's award in 2020. She currently works as a Senior Research Associate at Western Sydney University with Professor Trudgett and Professor Page. The focus of Rhonda's doctoral thesis, current research and employment is working and standing with Indigenous peoples in advancing equity and parity in Indigenous education.

Professor Michelle Trudgett is an Indigenous scholar from the Wiradjuri Nation in New South Wales. Michelle currently holds the position of Deputy Vice-Chancellor Indigenous Leadership at Western Sydney University. She has also held senior positions at the University of Technology Sydney and Macquarie University. Michelle is currently the Chair of the Universities Australia Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous Committee. She also serves as a Board Member on the GO Foundation. Michelle has received a number of awards including the highly prestigious National NAIDOC Scholar of the Year Award, the Neville Bonner Award for Teaching Excellence and the University of New England Distinguished Alumni Award.

Professor Susan Page is a national teaching award-winning Aboriginal educator and Indigenous higher education specialist, who is currently Director of Indigenous Learning and Teaching at Western Sydney University. Susan's research focuses on Indigenous Australian experiences of learning and academic work in higher education and student learning in Indigenous Studies. She has collaborated on multiple competitive research grants and is well published in Indigenous higher education. Susan has held several leadership positions including Associate Dean (Indigenous Leadership and Engagement), Centre Director and Head of Department, and she is currently an appointed Indigenous representative for the Universities Australia Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic Committee.

Dr Michelle Locke is a very proud mum of two boys and a Western Sydney University alum. From January 2020 to December 2022 Michelle was employed firstly as a Professional Researcher and, following conferral of her PhD in 2021, as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow with the Office of Deputy Vice-Chancellor Indigenous Leadership on the Developing Indigenous Early Career Researchers ARC project. In January 2023 Michelle commenced in the position of Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at Western Sydney University.

Please cite this article as:

Povey, R., Trudgett, M., Page, S., & Locke, M. (2025). Advice from Indigenous early career researchers: Indigenous futurity in Australian universities. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 54(2). DOI 10.55146/ajie.v54i2.1952



Except where otherwise noted, content in this journal is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). As an open access journal, articles are free to use with proper attribution. ISSN: 2049-7784.