

The confidence-competence paradox: Examining leadership capability in Indigenous higher education contexts

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This study examines a critical phenomenon in Australian higher education: the disconnect between university leaders' self-reported confidence and experience in Indigenous contexts. Drawing on data from a national survey and in-depth interviews with 41 university executives, we identify a confidence-competence paradox in which leaders express high confidence in engaging with Indigenous peoples and communities despite limited direct experience. In this study, competence is operationalised through self-reported experience in Indigenous higher education and leadership in Indigenous contexts, rather than through external assessment, enabling examination of the gap between leaders' confidence and their own acknowledged experience levels. We employed a mixed-method approach, utilising the Senior Leadership Capability Model (SLCM) to investigate the level of confidence and competence of executive university leaders in supporting Indigenous success. While only 22% of participants reported being very experienced in Indigenous higher education, 72% expressed confidence in Indigenous engagement. This paradox emerged from a broader study on developing a SLCM designed to foster Indigenous success by enhancing the capacity of non-Indigenous leaders. The model addresses the unrealistic expectations often placed on small numbers of Indigenous leaders who are frequently under-resourced and solely responsible for Indigenous outcomes across institutions. This paper explores the implications of the confidence-competence disconnect for leadership development, cultural competency training and sustainable institutional change. We argue that addressing this paradox is essential for creating authentic partnerships with Indigenous communities and distributing responsibility more equitably among university leadership.

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

Introduction

Australian universities face pressure to improve outcomes for Indigenous students and communities, yet this work often falls disproportionately on a small number of Indigenous leaders (Anderson et al., 2023; Trudgett et al., 2021). A recent meta-synthesis by Anderson et al. (2022) revealed that, despite four years of sustained efforts following the establishment of the *Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2017–2020* (Universities Australia, 2017), there was little progress toward sustained Indigenous participation in higher education. The progress that did occur involved assigning efforts to a small number of senior

Indigenous leaders at the policy and programmatic levels, creating an unsustainable and industrially precarious position for institutions. This paper presents significant findings from our broader study on developing a Senior Leadership Capability Model (SLCM): the disconnect between university leaders' self-reported confidence and their experience in Indigenous contexts. The study aims to address the need for a SLCM to foster Indigenous success, tailored for university executives, providing portfolio-aligned training that strengthens the capacity of senior leaders to make well-informed decisions that advance outcomes for Indigenous communities within their areas of responsibility.

To create lasting organisational change and success, it is unrealistic to place the totality of institutional Indigenous outcomes and expectations on the small number of Indigenous leaders, who are often under-resourced (Anderson et al., 2023; Trudgett et al., 2021). Non-Indigenous leaders must share some responsibilities for Indigenous outcomes within their institutional portfolios, contributing to overall Indigenous success. This study, therefore, focuses on the self-reported confidence and experience of senior university leaders, the majority of whom are non-Indigenous, to examine how this cohort perceives its own capability in Indigenous engagement.

This *confidence-competence paradox* raises important questions about how university leadership understands, develops and assesses cultural competency. This is a result of previous work undertaken by Anderson and Diamond (2020), and by Anderson et al. (2023), who comprehensively examined Indigenous key performance indicators within Anderson's affiliated institution through a case study approach. The results revealed a notable dedication toward the Indigenous agenda among university executives. There still existed a lack of assurance among staff members, leading to hesitancy in their interactions with Indigenous communities due to fear of unintentionally displaying cultural ignorance and reinforcing systemic racism. By examining this paradox in depth, we aim to provide insights that can inform more effective leadership development approaches and institutional change strategies.

The remainder of this paper begins with a review of the literature on cultural competence, Indigenous leadership in Australia and the racial contract embedded in the Australian system as a lens to better understand this phenomenon. Next, we outline the methodology used to conduct the study, followed by exploring the results. In the discussion section, we examine our findings in relation to existing literature. Finally, the conclusion summarises our key findings and their implications for the research field.

Review of literature

When searching for the words "confidence" AND "competence" AND "leadership" AND "Australia" in well-known databases such as Scopus, Sage, Eric and Informit, the results are minimal. Scopus provided 21 results, Sage 7, Eric 7 and Informit 29. Despite these results, none sufficiently fit the search criteria. The search revealed a dearth of research on the confidence and competence of leaders within the context of Indigenous higher education. Much of the research is centred around cultural competence rather than the relationship between confidence and experience/competence. As we could not locate journal articles that explored the relationship between experience or competence and the level of confidence in leaders working within Indigenous contexts in tertiary education, we organised our review of the literature as follows.

Cultural competence in universities and leadership contexts

Cultural competence training has been around in Australia for over four decades, with the overall goal of improving knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This

training might be seen as a way to improve the quality of services offered to Indigenous peoples and communities (Fredericks & Bargallie, 2020). While there does not seem to be a single definition for cultural competence (Universities Australia, 2011), for the development of courses within tertiary or higher education, the following definition has been used: “Student and staff knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australian cultures, histories and contemporary realities and awareness of Indigenous protocols, combined with the proficiency to engage and work effectively in Indigenous contexts congruent to the expectations of Indigenous Australian peoples” (p. 6).

Cultural competence has also been then defined within academia as “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (Cross et al., 1989, p. 13).

Australian universities must develop cultural competence training courses for students and staff. These courses should specifically target the diverse challenges faced by Indigenous populations, including discrimination related to race, behaviour expectations and appearance, among other factors (Fredericks & Bargallie, 2020; Universities Australia, 2011). Universities Australia’s *National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (2011) aimed to ensure that the course development aligned with the national goals and directions. Yet across fields, there is an inconsistency of wording. For example, in Australia, “cultural competence” and “cultural capability” have been mostly used in the fields of education while “cultural safety”, “cultural security” or “cultural humility” have been used within health (Fredericks & Bargallie, 2020). Importantly, Fredericks and Bargallie (2020) suggest:

Considering the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in Australia, it is unrealistic to think that cultural competence could be measured or attained through ad hoc Indigenous cultural competence training courses, in a country where idealised and homogenised visions of Indigenous culture are the object that oversimplifies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and reinforces negative stereotypes. (p. 296)

Therefore, to be able to assess one’s cultural competence is notoriously difficult, with research suggesting that individuals often overestimate their cross-cultural capabilities (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013).

Overestimation in leadership contexts is particularly problematic. For example, the cultural competence of staff overall has been associated with and inclusive of the cultural competence of leaders (Dauvrin & Lorant, 2015). Hence, if a leader’s cultural competence is poor or limited, the cultural competence of their staff will also be poor, likely resulting in unsafe environments for those coming from marginalised groups. Additionally, Hammer et al. (2003) identified a phenomenon they termed “developmental mismatch,” where individuals’ perceived intercultural competence exceeds their developmental level. This mismatch can lead to inappropriate behaviours, missed opportunities for growth and reinforcement of existing power imbalances.

Indigenous leadership in Australian higher education

Indigenous leadership remains relatively under-explored within the broader field of leadership research in the Western world. According to Kiatkoski Kim et al. (2020), there were no published studies on Indigenous leadership in academic research that could guide policy and practice. The limited available research has been attributed to the paucity of accessible cultural knowledge as well as the Western-centric

nature of leadership literature (Anderson et al., 2023). The Australian higher education sector has historically marginalised Indigenous knowledge and leadership. Australia's first university was established over 150 years ago, yet the first senior Indigenous leadership position was not created until 2009 (Horne & Sherington, 2010). By 2021, among 39 public universities in Australia, only 28 senior Indigenous scholars were employed, less than one per university (Trudgett et al., 2021). It is also important to acknowledge that, among the 41 university executives and senior leaders who participated in this study, only six (17%) identified as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

Indigenous Australian leaders face multiple challenges. While they need appropriate qualifications and experience, they are also expected to maintain strong community connections. This reflects Foley's (2007) suggestion that Indigenous people lived in "a pluralist society that did not experience dominance and leadership in the Western sense" (p. 179). The expectations upon Indigenous leaders are significantly greater than those placed upon non-Indigenous leaders, who are typically assessed based solely on their qualifications and experience. Systems that reward academic achievements over community engagement may support certain types of leadership while marginalising others. Anderson and Diamond (2020) argued there are three often interrelated career paths in higher education: senior leadership, professional and academic roles. Individuals in these positions are typically expected to hold a PhD—the highest level of education available—and demonstrate management experience, strategic planning skills, and knowledge of financial resources and budgeting, among other competencies. These stringent requirements tend to favour groups with greater access to Western education, thereby benefiting some over others.

Kiatkoski Kim et al. (2020) suggested that supportive leaders within Indigenous communities require a specific set of characteristics. Russell et al. (2022) define effective leadership as "highlighted by the ability of an individual to utilise a diversity of constituent viewpoints, perspectives, and 'voices' to guide their respective decision-making processes" (p. 297). Coates et al. (2022) stated that Indigenous academic staff pursue senior leadership roles as a means of driving positive institutional outcomes alongside personal career development. Mitchell and Bishop (2020) argue that fostering leadership informed by Indigenous ways of being is crucial for disrupting power dynamics and systemic racism within institutions. While integrating Indigenous knowledge and perspectives is a valuable goal, it is equally important to acknowledge the diversity of Aboriginal Torres and Strait Islander peoples and knowledges to avoid a "quasi homogenisation" of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in Australian institutions. Treating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges as a single worldview erases the sovereignty, diversity and relational obligations that Indigenous peoples have long defended, and it continues to reproduce the colonial assumption that Indigenous nations share one uniform set of beliefs. This nuance requires specific types of leadership, where we do, indeed, require Indigenous-specific leadership development. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium proposed a series of ideas to enhance the recruitment and retention of Indigenous people in the higher education sector (NATSIHEC, 2018). This report included the following recommendations: Indigenous peoples should be actively involved in university governance at all levels of management; Indigenous staffing should increase across all levels and areas; and universities should collaborate with Indigenous communities.

The racial contract and cultural load

Bargallie (2020) described the "racial contract" that exists in Australian institutions. This racial contract operates within the workforce and it is useful to make the invisible visible by providing a conceptual

notion for exploring white privilege and racial disadvantage. We are particularly interested in how white privilege can manifest as overconfidence in cross-cultural engagement without corresponding depth of understanding. This contract serves to preserve racial order, securing privileges for white citizens while subordinating non-whites, and is upheld through ongoing failure to address racism and reform cultural norms. This racial contract contributes to what has been termed the “cultural load” or “colonial load” – an additional and frequently invisible workload assumed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the workplace (Australian Public Service Commission, 2023). The concept has recently been reframed from “cultural load” to “cultural responsibility” and “colonial load” (Weenthunga Health Network, 2023), acknowledging that culture is a strength, not a burden, and that the responsibility for addressing colonial structures should rest with settlers, not Indigenous peoples.

The racial contract includes the idea of Indigenous academics juggling numerous activities in a limited timeframe, both personal and professional. Professionally, many of those activities are related to supporting Indigenous students (Diversity Council Australia, 2022):

This includes extra Indigenous-related work demands that non-Indigenous colleagues do not have, [cultural load] expectations to educate non-Indigenous colleagues about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and racism, and expectations to talk on behalf of all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. (para. 1)

Problematically, the cultural load (Australian Public Service Commission, 2023) or racial contract means that Indigenous leaders and staff are tasked with driving systematic change and bearing its weight (Povey et al., 2021). This results in an inequitable distribution of workload between Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders and staff. Moreover, since most of the work is undertaken by Indigenous peoples, non-Indigenous leaders have limited opportunities to acquire Indigenous knowledge and put it into practice.

Methodology

Research design

This journal article aims to explore the relationship between university leaders’ self-reported confidence and their experience within Indigenous contexts. This paper evidences a major finding from a larger project we conducted (see Anderson et al., 2025). We employed a mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 1999; cited in Pham et al., 2024), combining qualitative case study methods, thematic analysis and quantitative descriptive statistics to achieve our aim.

The qualitative component involved open-ended questions in an online survey and in-depth interviews with university executives, exploring participants’ attitudes, beliefs and experiences related to Indigenous higher education, cultural competence, capacity building and training needs. Quantitative descriptive statistics were used to summarise survey data, facilitating the identification of patterns and trends. These activities explored participants’ attitudes, beliefs and experiences related to Indigenous higher education, cultural competence, capacity building and training needs for university leaders. Confidence and experience were measured using self-report Likert-type scales embedded within the survey instrument. Experience in Indigenous higher education was assessed on a 4-point scale (limited, somewhat experienced, moderately experienced, very experienced), while confidence in engaging with Indigenous peoples and communities was measured on a 5-point scale ranging from “not at all

confident” to “very confident”. Experience in leading projects within Indigenous contexts was assessed on a 5-point scale from “no experience” to “expert”. As Miksza et al. (2023) state, descriptive statistics enable researchers to effectively communicate the main findings to stakeholders and inform subsequent analyses or interventions. These quantitative patterns and trends were later analysed in great depth through qualitative analysis.

As qualitative data focuses on lived experience and has significant potential to uncover intricacies and nuances (Miles et al., 2020), six in-depth interviews were conducted with university executives and senior leaders by the lead Indigenous researcher. Although the overall sample comprised 41 participants, the inclusion of six in-depth interviews provided rich, contextualised insights into university executives’ lived experiences, enabling a deeper interpretive understanding that extends beyond what could be captured through broader survey data alone.

Full ethics approval for the research project undertaken by the authors was obtained from Griffith University (GU Ref No: 2024/459).

Participants and data collection

The research participants were 41 executive and senior leaders currently working in Australian universities nationwide, holding positions including Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Dean, Executive Dean, Director and Senior Manager. The online survey using Qualtrics was distributed between July 2024 and February 2025 through various channels, including LinkedIn, academic forums, symposiums and workshops. The survey included 34 questions divided into three main sections: demographics, roles and responsibilities, and potential improvements. Six in-depth interviews were conducted by the lead researcher by the end of January 2025, exploring participants’ involvement with Indigenous staff, recruitment processes, mentorship programs, professional development opportunities and project collaboration.

Data analysis

Data analysis was initially conducted using Qualtrics to identify categories and organise responses, particularly for open-ended questions. Qualtrics provided a platform to collect and store data, and to perform advanced analytics. This facilitated the organisation and categorisation of the data we produced with the senior leaders. Descriptive statistics provided tools to summarise and interpret the dataset, effectively communicating the main findings (Miksza et al., 2023). For qualitative data, the interviews were then transcribed by a professional transcription service and imported into NVivo for analysis. We then used thematic analysis to analyse the open-ended responses and the interviews. “Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Themes can be organised in various ways, such as concentrating on a single theme or a group of themes. Regardless of the chosen method, it offers a comprehensive and detailed exploration of the theme. To enhance analytical rigour, coding was undertaken collaboratively among the research team, with emerging themes discussed iteratively to ensure consistency and credibility. Reflexive practices, including regular debriefing among researchers, were employed throughout the analysis to manage researcher positionality and interpretive bias.

Results

Participant demographics

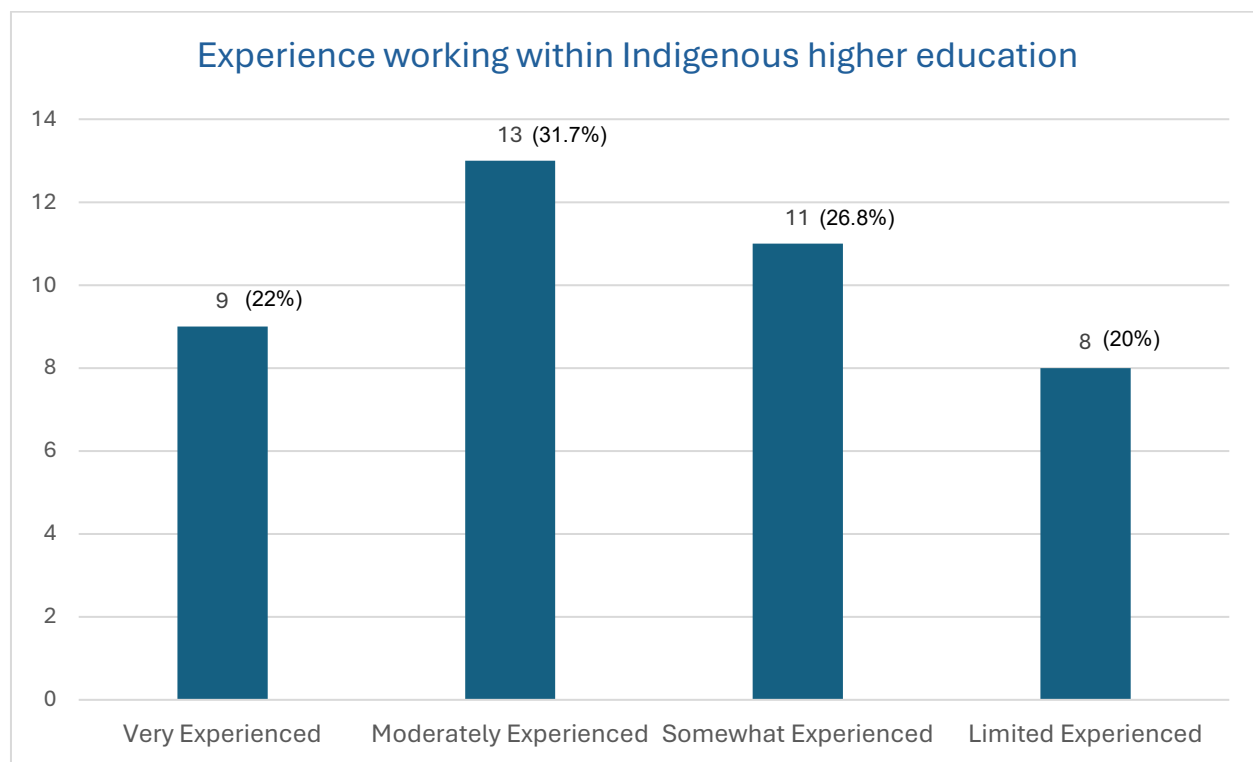
The study included 41 university leaders, comprising four vice-chancellors (10%), six deputy vice-chancellors (15%), five pro vice-chancellors (12%), five deans (15%), 11 directors (27%), and two senior managers (5%); eight participants declared “other” positions (20%). In terms of Indigenous identification, only six participants (16.2%) identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, while 31 (83.8%) were non-Indigenous. The majority of participants (59.5%) were female, 29.7% were male, and the remainder identified as non-binary, other, or preferred not to say. Most participants worked on a full-time basis (95%) and more than half of the leaders had been in their positions over one year (66%) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptive demographic results

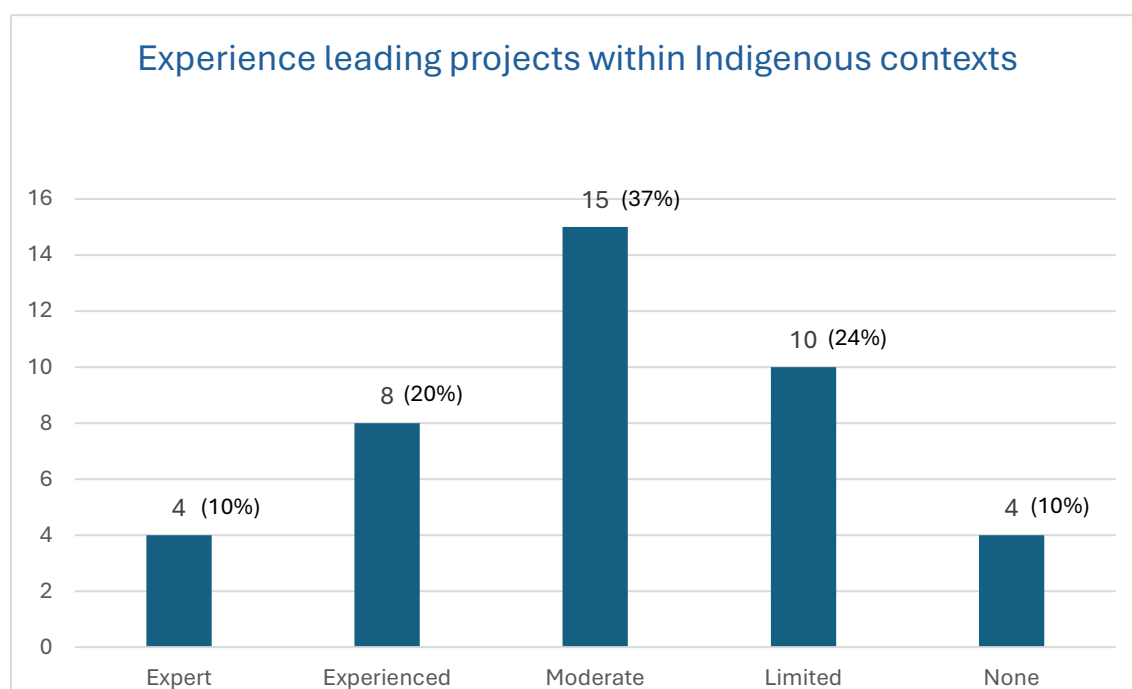
Category	Sub-categories	Count	Percentage
Gender	Male	11	29.7%
	Female	22	59.5%
	Non-binary	1	2.7%
	Other	1	2.7%
	Prefer not to say	2	5.4%
Indigeneity	Aboriginal	4	10.8%
	Torres Strait Islander	1	2.7%
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	1	2.7%
	Neither Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander	31	83.8%
Employment status	Full-time	35	94.6%
	Part-time	1	2.7%
	Casual	1	2.7%
Duration in the current position	Less than 1 year	4	11%
	1 – 5 years	20	54%
	5 – 10 years	9	9%
	Over 10 years	3	3%
	Prefer not to say	1	1%

Experience in Indigenous higher education

Among the 41 participants, only 22% reported being very experienced in Indigenous higher education, while 31.7% were moderately experienced, 26.8% were somewhat experienced, and 20% had limited experience. When asked about their experience in leading projects within Indigenous contexts, only 10% considered themselves experts, 20% saw themselves as experienced, 37% identified as moderately knowledgeable, 25% had limited experience, and 10% had no experience in this area (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Experience in Indigenous higher education

A similar pattern is observed when discussing experience leading projects within Indigenous contexts. Among the 41 leaders, only 10% considered themselves experts in leading projects in Indigenous contexts. A few saw themselves as experienced (20%), while a larger portion identified as moderately knowledgeable (37%). A small number had no experience in this area (10%) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Experience leading projects

Confidence in Indigenous engagement

Despite the range of experience levels, most participants reported high confidence in engaging with Indigenous peoples and communities. When asked about their confidence in engaging with Indigenous peoples, 24% felt very confident, 54% felt reasonably confident, 17% somewhat confident, and only 2% each reported being slightly confident or not at all confident.

A similar pattern emerged regarding confidence in engaging with Indigenous communities, priorities and activities, with 47.2% feeling fairly confident, 25% very confident, 19.4% somewhat confident, 5.6% slightly confident, and 2.8% not at all confident (see Table 2). The report explicitly notes: “There is no apparent relationship between how experienced the leaders are and how confident they feel performing their different tasks” (Anderson et al., 2025).

Table 2: Levels of confidence

Category	Sub-categories	Count	Percentage
Working with Indigenous peoples	Very confident	10	24%
	Fairly confident	22	54%
	Somewhat confident	7	17%
	Slightly confident	1	2%
	Not at all confident	1	2%
Engaging with Indigenous communities	Very confident	9	25%
	Fairly confident	17	47%
	Somewhat confident	7	19%
	Slightly confident	2	6%
	Not at all confident	1	3%
Engaging with Indigenous communities/peoples or activities	Very confident	9	25%
	Fairly confident	17	47%

One might assume that individuals with more experiences in a particular area would feel more confident than those with less experience. However, our data revealed that confidence levels were not solely tied to experience. Among the seven participants with limited experience working with Indigenous students, only one reported being slightly confident, and one was not at all confident. This indicates that, overall, participants appeared confident in engaging with Indigenous peoples, activities and priorities regardless of their prior experience. There is no apparent relationship between how experienced the leaders are and how confident they feel performing their different tasks.

Training and perceptions

In the previous two years, most participants (82.9%) had attended training focusing on cultural awareness, cultural safety or cultural competency (see Table 3). Among these, 73.5% attended Indigenous cultural awareness training, 64.7% attended unconscious bias training, 52.9% attended cultural competency training and 50% attended cultural safety training.

Table 3: Training

Category	Sub-categories	Count	Percentage
Leaders' participation in training	Yes	34	82.9%
	No	6	14.6%
	Never heard of it	1	2.4%
When training was attended	2022	11	32.3%
	2023	17	50%
	2024	6	17.6%

Participants generally viewed these trainings positively, considering them essential rather than patronising. However, they desired more meaningful and effective cultural competence training, describing current efforts as a “band-aid approach instead of a holistic approach” (Participant #27). They highlighted the need for training designed and facilitated by Indigenous people to ensure authenticity and impact, and for approaches that consider “the diversity of contemporary higher education workforce, especially among academics” (Participant #18).

Discussion

The confidence-competence paradox

While these findings offer important insights into university executives’ confidence within Indigenous contexts, they should be interpreted in light of the study’s modest sample size and reliance on self-reported measures. As such, the implications discussed here are indicative rather than generalisable across the entire higher education sector. Our research reveals a significant disconnect between experience and confidence in Indigenous engagement among university participants. While only 22% of participants reported being very experienced in Indigenous higher education, a striking 72% expressed confidence in engaging with Indigenous peoples and communities. This discrepancy between actual experience and perceived competence raises fundamental questions about how university leaders assess their own cultural capability. Based on these findings, we pose the following questions to institutions and leaders as pathways to develop and build sustainable Indigenous engagement capability.

Training and knowledge development

- When, how, and why do university leaders choose to undertake—or not undertake—cultural competence training?
- How is this training structured, and does it effectively address knowledge gaps?
- Since education typically builds on prior knowledge, what happens when leaders’ foundational understanding is significantly lower than their self-reported confidence?

Knowledge versus confidence gap

- What is the actual knowledge base of university leaders whose confidence is high, but experience remains limited?
- What factors contribute to this gap—are leaders relying more on assumptions than direct experience?
- How does this disconnect impact Indigenous students and the broader learning environment?

Decision-making and community perception

- How does confidence without sufficient experience influence institutional decision-making?
- How do Indigenous communities perceive this overconfidence? Is it seen as perpetuating colonial paternalism?
- Might this disconnect lead to rejection when collaboration with Indigenous stakeholders is proposed?

Policy implications

- What implications does this confidence-competence gap have for institutional policy development?
- Does it shape approaches to Indigenous engagement and education in meaningful ways, or create obstacles to genuine progress?

These questions provide a starting point for institutions to critically examine their approaches to Indigenous engagement and for leaders to reflect on their own capabilities. Addressing this confidence-competence paradox is essential to further strengthen and advance Indigenous success in higher education.

Importantly, we believe the disconnection between confidence and experience aligns with Hammer et al.'s (2003) concept of “developmental mismatch”, where individuals’ perceived intercultural competence exceeds their developmental level. It may also reflect what Bargallie (2020) describes as the persistent impact of the racial contract in Australian institutions, where white privilege can manifest as overconfidence in cross-cultural engagement without corresponding depth of understanding. Hammer et al.'s (2003) mismatch can have significant implications, particularly in leadership and education, as in these fields cultural competence is crucial. How this mismatch is expressed reflects the need for accurate self-assessment and targeted training to bridge the gap between perception and reality.

In Australia, where race is often overlooked in organisational discourse, a striking paradox emerges: non-Indigenous leaders frequently display overconfidence in their decision-making and, at the same time, Indigenous employees report systemic erosion of self-assurance. Bargallie et al.'s (2023) research on Indigenous workers highlights this divide, documenting how precarious employment conditions foster frustration, stress and depression, emotions that directly undermine workplace confidence.

This disconnect reflects what critical scholars term the racial contract—the unspoken rules governing whose knowledge and presence are valued in Australian workplaces. Yet unlike countries with more explicit race-conscious policies, Australia’s reluctance to acknowledge racial dynamics means most organisations lack frameworks even to recognise this phenomenon. Non-Indigenous leaders often

remain oblivious to both their racial positioning and how organisational structures quietly take advantage of whiteness.

The consequences are particularly acute for Indigenous staff, who must navigate workplaces where race is rendered invisible yet remains determinative. Without mechanisms to surface these dynamics, Australian organisations risk perpetuating cycles where Indigenous talent is undervalued while leadership overconfidence goes unchecked.

The confidence-competence paradox has significant implications for Indigenous engagement in higher education. Leaders who overestimate their cultural competence may be less likely to seek additional training or guidance, miss critical cultural nuances in their interactions and inadvertently reinforce colonial structures through well-intentioned but misguided initiatives. This can perpetuate the burden on Indigenous staff, who often must navigate the consequences of these missteps while also carrying the cultural load of supporting institutional diversity efforts.

Potential causes of the paradox

Several factors may contribute to the confidence-competence paradox observed in this study.

1. **Limitations of current training approaches:** Most participants had undertaken cultural awareness training. However, these programs may not adequately convey the depth and complexity of Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being. One participant noted that many trainings are a “band-aid approach” (Participant #27). Additionally, undertaking training is also seen from the perspective of “doing a favour” (Participant #7) rather than from a genuine desire to learn. Another issue around training was its design. Participant #5 expressed scepticism, as training is often seen as a “typical HR developed module”. If the training was delivered by an Indigenous person, participants might be more confident about authenticity and impact.
2. **Positional authority:** University leaders may derive confidence from their senior positions rather than from specific expertise in Indigenous contexts. Their success in other domains may lead them to overestimate their capabilities in cross-cultural engagement. Moreover, Participant #20 said, “It is still too rare that a genuine partnership is built, and that non-Indigenous Australians recognise that they actually have a load to learn and would be better as professionals, individuals and just people generally if they set aside the arrogant assumption that coloniser thinking is somehow superior.”
3. **Limited feedback mechanisms:** Leaders may receive little direct feedback on their cultural competence, exceptionally if Indigenous staff cannot provide honest critiques due to power imbalances.
4. **Differing assessment standards:** What leaders consider “good engagement” may vary significantly from Indigenous perspectives on meaningful partnership and collaboration. While some leaders consider learning about Indigenous cultures and knowledges as positive, others reported a different perspective. Participant #24 said, “I remember vividly an example of an Indigenous colleague who was upset to learn that we—his immediate colleagues—were asked to do training to learn how to work with Indigenous colleagues, and he emphasised that he was a staff member and colleague like anyone of us, and wanted to be treated in that way.” Hence, while some might assess training as positive, others think it results in differentiated treatment that is sometimes uncalled for.

5. **Institutional emphasis on positive narratives:** Universities often highlight success stories in Indigenous engagement while minimising or ignoring challenges and failures, potentially creating an inflated sense of institutional and individual achievement. As training is not designed from a holistic approach (Participant #27), it is likely that narratives are selected to fit the goal, often ignoring those stories that could contribute as positive learning experiences that might have been a failure.

Implications for leadership development and the SLCM

The confidence-competence paradox identified in this research has significant implications for leadership development in higher education and directly informs the development of the Senior Leadership Capability Model (SLCM). This is an empirically derived model grounded in the qualitative and quantitative findings of this study and the broader project from which it emerges (Anderson et al., 2025), rather than a purely conceptual or theoretical framework. The SLCM aims to foster Indigenous success in higher education by enhancing the capacity of non-Indigenous leaders through portfolio-specific training, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions that benefit Indigenous communities within their portfolios.

Based on our findings and building on the work of Anderson et al. (2023) on Indigenous ways of developing leadership in education, the SLCM should include the following six professional learning themes:

1. **Introduction to Indigenous people in higher education:** Addressing the challenges faced by Indigenous people in higher education and providing historical context.
2. **Indigenous cultures and knowledges:** Understanding Indigenous knowledge systems, perspectives, cultural protocols and rights-based approaches to inclusion.
3. **University-community partnerships:** Developing authentic and sustainable partnerships with Indigenous communities through effective consultation protocols and collaborative decision-making processes.
4. **Indigenous student success:** Supporting Indigenous students within university environments through culturally responsive practices and comprehensive support systems.
5. **Building organisational capacity for strategic change:** Including Indigenous employment strategies, cultural safety frameworks and change management approaches.
6. **Professional skills development:** Developing specific leadership capabilities for advancing Indigenous education, including cultural competency, policy development and strategic planning.

To effectively address the confidence-competence paradox, these modules should:

1. **Challenge self-perceptions:** Incorporate opportunities for accurate self-assessment, including feedback from Indigenous colleagues and community members.
2. **Emphasise experiential learning:** Complement abstract knowledge with practical experience working with and learning from Indigenous communities.
3. **Develop critical reflexivity:** Build capacity for critical reflection on assumptions, biases and limitations in cross-cultural contexts.

4. **Shift from knowledge to relationships:** Focus less on acquiring knowledge about Indigenous cultures and more on building authentic relationships with Indigenous peoples and communities.
5. **Address systemic issues:** Examine how institutional structures and practices may perpetuate colonial relationships, moving beyond individual competence to organisational transformation.

Conclusion

The conclusions drawn from this study reflect patterns observed within a specific cohort of 41 university executives and senior leaders; therefore, the conclusions should be understood as contextually grounded rather than representative of the higher education sector as a whole. The confidence-competence paradox identified in this research represents a significant challenge for advancing Indigenous engagement in Australian higher education. While university leaders express high confidence in working with Indigenous peoples and communities, their experience and expertise in these contexts is often limited, reflecting the cognitive dissonance of a colonial state that still has not made peace with its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people—a dissonance where “Aboriginal” issues are perceived as too overwhelming, immobilising non-Indigenous people into comfortable inaction rather than meaningful engagement. This dissonance and disconnect has profound implications for how institutions approach cultural competence development, leadership training and organisational change.

As Anderson and Diamond’s preliminary work (2020) revealed, even when university executives demonstrate high commitment to Indigenous agendas, staff often lack confidence and hesitate to engage with Indigenous people due to fear of unintentionally displaying cultural ignorance and reinforcing systemic racism. The SLCM developed through this research aims to address this gap by building professional capacity for university executives through portfolio-specific training and organisational change principles to provide long-lasting support for Indigenous communities.

The SLCM represents a departure from typical cultural awareness and cultural safety training Australian universities offer. It provides a structured, evidence-based program for developing leadership capabilities tailored to specific portfolios and institutional contexts. The program is designed to be immersive and offered asynchronously and synchronously to accommodate different time constraints, employing innovative design principles with multiple entry and exit points.

Addressing the confidence-competence paradox requires more nuanced approaches to leadership development that challenge self-perceptions, emphasise experiential learning, develop critical reflexivity, focus on relationship-building and address systemic issues. It also requires a shift in how institutions evaluate leadership capability in Indigenous contexts, moving beyond self-assessment to include Indigenous perspectives and measurable outcomes.

By acknowledging the limitations of current approaches and developing more sophisticated frameworks for leadership development through the SLCM, universities can better support Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders in creating more inclusive, equitable and culturally responsive institutions. Most importantly, this model makes a framework for sharing responsibilities for Indigenous outcomes more equitably, reducing the burden on Indigenous leaders and creating more sustainable approaches to institutional change.

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