

Reclaiming Eldership in the academy: An examination of the Elders in Residence roles in Australian higher education

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Indigenous Australian Elders are key cultural authorities in higher education, with their presence expanding through Elders in Residence programs over the past two decades. While government reports, sector-wide reviews and institutional strategies recognise the value of Elders in Residence roles, research on the scope, efficacy and integration of such roles into institutional governance remains limited. Reporting on findings from an Australian Research Council-funded study, this paper centres the voices of six Elders in Residence through in-depth qualitative interviews and examines their positioning within complex, nuanced ecosystems of university governance, Indigenous leadership and community engagement. This paper presents the first sector-wide examination of Elders in Residence programs across Australian higher education institutions since the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*, which offered only limited discussion of Elders in Residence roles (Behrendt et al., 2012). Drawing on Moodie's (2018) decolonising race theory, we analyse Elders' contributions across fragmented webs of institutional power and accountability. Conceptually, the paper introduces the Dhurrun model to illuminate the layered, relational and adaptive nature of Elders' roles within higher education ecosystems. Our findings reveal that Elders' roles are often misunderstood, inconsistently supported, and at risk of being reduced to symbolic gestures, rather than recognised as vital agents of reform and relational governance. This paper identifies uneven patterns of recognition, participation and authority across institutional governance processes, exposing a fragmented and fragile ecology that undermines Indigenous sovereignty. We argue that (re)claiming Eldership within universities is essential to restoring Indigenous authority and embedding relational accountability at the centre of higher education ecosystems.

Keywords: Elders in Residence, higher education, self-determination, Indigenous leadership, equity

Introduction

Indigenous¹ Australian Elders are invaluable knowledge holders and cultural authorities who embody deep wisdom of Country², Lore³, language and spirituality that has been passed down

¹ In this article, "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. While not all may use the term "Indigenous", it is used throughout this paper for consistency. "Non-Indigenous" refers to all other Australians.

² The term "Country" derives from Australian Aboriginal English; however, as Foster and colleagues (2020) note, Indigenous Australian languages contain diverse terms with distinct meanings and Lore. Like many other First Nations scholars, we capitalise and pluralise Country, retaining the "y" when referring to it as a proper noun denoting primary relationships (Engel-Di Mauro & Carroll, 2014; Foster et al., 2020).

³ "Lore" refers to the unique belief systems, customs and kinship structures that connect Indigenous peoples physically and spiritually to Country and community (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, n.d.). We capitalise to recognise Lore as a sacred, living knowledge system distinct from Western frameworks.

intergenerationally. Within Indigenous Australian communities, Eldership is not simply a matter of age or appointment; rather, Elders are recognised by their communities for their cultural knowledge, leadership and contributions, and often they hold responsibility for guiding and making decisions on behalf of their Nation groups (Cox et al., 2021). In higher education, Elders offer crucial insights for upholding Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing while navigating contemporary challenges within institutional settings (Chapman & Whiteford, 2017; Cox et al., 2021; Gifford & McEachern, 2019). While many Indigenous Elders contribute to higher education through Indigenous centres, research institutes, Elders advisory committees and councils, this study focuses specifically on Elders in Residence positions.

Over the past two decades, numerous Australian universities have recognised the leadership, mentorship and cross-cultural education Elders provide to students, staff and the broader community by establishing Elders in Residence roles. Despite the growing presence and recognised value of Elders in Residence, as highlighted in sector reviews (Behrendt et al., 2012; Universities Australia, 2017, 2022), government reports and institutional strategies, there remains limited research concerning the nature, efficacy and integration of these roles into institutional governance. This is further underscored in international literature, notably from Canada, North America and Aotearoa/New Zealand, which advocates for higher education sectors to re-imagine approaches to working with First Nations⁴ Elders as “keepers of Indigenous knowledge, dynamic ethical consultants, community protectors, and credible sources of information” (Flicker et al., 2015, p. 1149). Consequently, there is a clear imperative for Australian research to amplify Elders in Residences’ voices to better understand these roles.

This paper reports on the first stage of a broader study, Yarruwala⁵: Complex Ecosystems of Indigenous Higher Education Leadership, which examines Indigenous leadership roles in higher education through their connections with internal and external stakeholders, aiming to understand the possibilities for Indigenous autonomy and self-determination. Our research team, three Indigenous and one non-Indigenous scholar, draws upon Gamilaraay scholar Moodie’s (2018) decolonising race theory to analyse the experiences of Elders in Residence within higher education’s layered ecosystems of power, influence and authority. By centring the voices of diverse Elders in Residence across Australian universities, this study moves beyond current institution or community specific accounts of Eldership to capture their broader positioning within the complex, interwoven webs of academic, community, cultural and political domains. Elders’ reflections reveal both the transformative potential of their contributions to governance, Indigenous portfolios and communities, and the risks posed by fragmented and inconsistent institutional approaches that leave their roles misunderstood, unevenly supported or reduced to symbolic gestures. Higher education is conceptualised, in this study, as a vast, intricate, living ecosystem, alive with intersecting networks and relationships. Within this ecosystem, our research finds that when Elders are engaged as keystone stakeholders, their knowledge, cultural authority and relational accountability strengthen the web of governance; however, when they are marginalised or excluded, broken strands weaken the system’s capacity to sustain genuine Indigenous authority. Our study examines the actions undertaken by Elders and senior higher education leaders to reshape governance structures, strengthen missing connections and cultivate more resilient systems of leadership, while also identifying the unresolved challenges that persist. By highlighting these dynamics, our paper shows the importance of embedding Elders as central agents in higher education ecosystems, vital to advancing Indigenous authority.

⁴ The term “First Nations” refers to people with familial heritage from, and membership in, the ethnic groups who are the earliest known inhabitants of an area. Literature discussing First Nations peoples’ experiences across a range of countries is considered in this paper.

⁵ “Yarruwala” broadly translates to mean “mighty” or “powerful” in Wiradjuri language.

Background: Implementation and recognition of Elders in Residence programs

Despite global efforts to decolonise and Indigenise higher education gaining momentum, literature finds the sector remains shaped by Eurocentric traditions, neoliberal practices and colonial governance structures, with systemic resistance to reform (Kennedy et al., 2020; Stein, 2022). While scholars and First Nations communities have long urged universities to engage authentically with Indigenous epistemologies and leadership (Battiste et al., 2002; Pidgeon, 2016; Stein, 2022), the sector's approaches have been critiqued as ad hoc and peripheral to core operations (Behrendt et al., 2012; Bennett et al., 2024). While international research documents increasing First Nations leadership at senior governance levels (Berryman et al., 2017; Kennedy et al., 2020; Pidgeon, 2016; Stein, 2022), our review of university web pages and strategies reveals that, although Elders in Residence are becoming more visible across the sector, institutional commitments to these roles remain uneven and inconsistent.

Euahleyai/Gamillaroi scholar Behrendt and colleagues' national *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (2012) was pivotal in recognising the evolving role of Elders in Residence, shifting from student support roles in the early 2000s to encompassing research, teaching, governance and community engagement. The review found these programs have "raised the profile of Elders in higher education" and reinforced their importance in delivering culturally safe counselling and pastoral care, fostering cross-cultural understanding and respect throughout institutions, as well as strengthening partnerships with local Indigenous communities (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. 223). However, more than a decade later, the higher education landscape has shifted, and we are yet to see a comprehensive, updated sector-wide study dedicated to examining the role, impact and experiences of Elders in Residence. While subsequent sector-wide higher education reviews and strategies, such as the various iterations of the Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy and the more recent Australian Universities Accord Indigenous Strategy, acknowledge Elders' contributions, the lack of detailed and Elder-centred analysis reflects a significant gap in scholarship.

While there are notable exceptions (e.g., Chapman & Whiteford, 2017; Cox et al., 2021), limited literature centres the voices of Elders in Residence or explores the diverse models of such programs across Australian universities. Elders' contributions are more often referenced indirectly in institutional documents (e.g., Reconciliation Action Plans, Indigenous strategies, annual reports) and framed within broader discourses on Indigenisation, community engagement and cultural competency. Although some studies highlight the benefits of these roles for students, staff, institutions and broader Indigenous communities (Busija et al., 2017; Chapman & Whiteford, 2017; Cox et al., 2021; Gainsford, 2018), they too often overlook the relational, spiritual and political dimensions of Elders' work. Moreover, existing scholarship offers limited examination of the structural barriers faced by Elders and the governance reforms necessary to overcome these challenges. This gap underscores the need for Indigenous-led research that both values Eldership and advances methodologies grounded in self-determination.

In the absence of sector-wide research on Elders in Residence, the contributions of Wiradjuri Elder Aunty Elaine Chapman and Professor Gail Whiteford, who was Macquarie University's Pro-Vice Chancellor Social Inclusion from 2009 to 2014, offer an important foundation for this paper to build upon. Their 2017 study documented the establishment of an Elder in Residence position at Macquarie University, highlighting the complexities of institutional negotiations, cultural protocols and community consultation, while underscoring the sense of belonging Elders foster within universities. Their work detailed the journey from early community and academic consultations to piloting an Elder in Residence program, highlighting the challenges of drafting a job description given that "the role of an Elder in Residence has a quality of 'being with' rather than a series of discreet tasks" (Chapman & Whiteford,

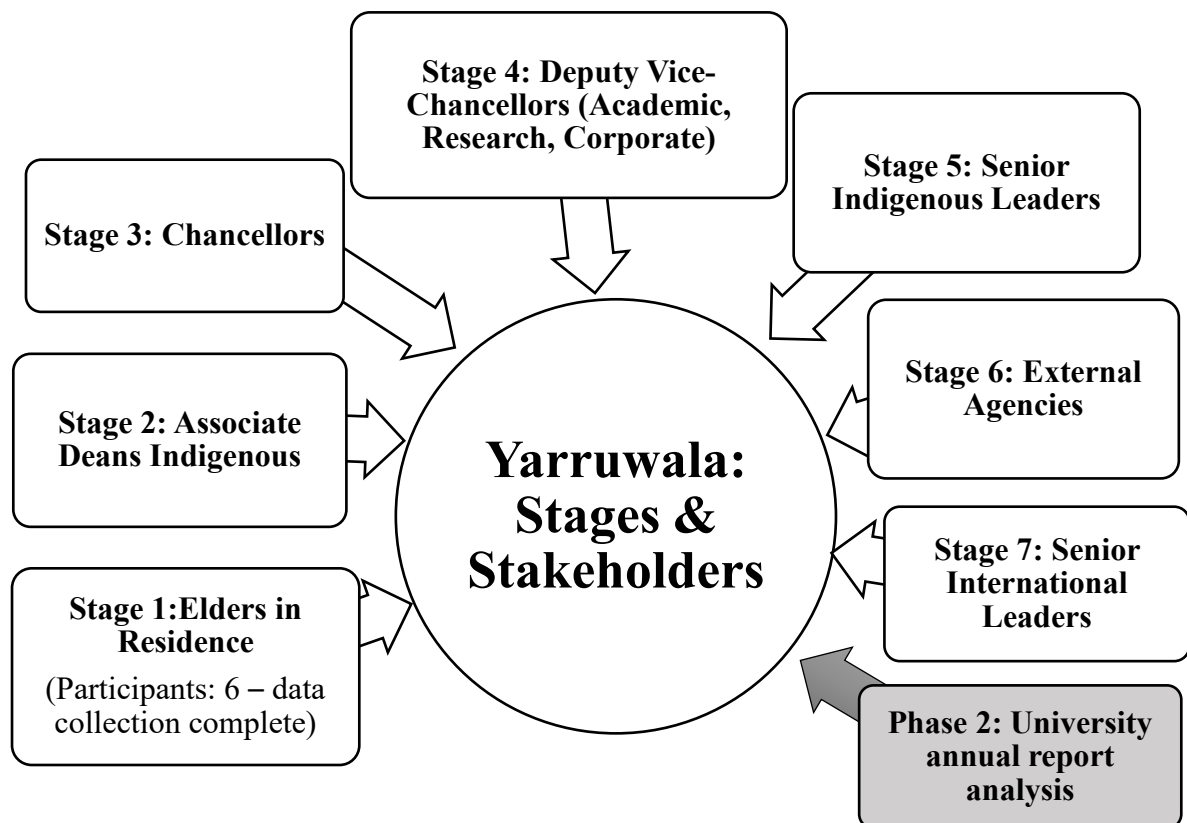
2017, p. 11). While they provided practical recommendations for developing such roles, including consultation, collaboration, institutional support, clear parameters and accountability, they also noted the ongoing need for research to specifically share insights and recommendations from the perspectives of Elders already working in these roles.

International studies also underscore the critical role of First Nations Elders and Tribal Leaders in Residence in higher education, both in challenging Eurocentric paradigms and supporting nation-building leadership approaches, while providing “a thread of intergenerational continuity giving students a sense of self, family history, tradition and roots” (Gifford & McEachern, 2019, p. 42). This is supported by the work of Ducharme (2013), Fayant and colleagues (2010), Kennedy and colleagues (2020), Lewis (2017), Marshall and colleagues (2015), and Royal (2011). Literature by Ducharme (2013) narrowly frames their contributions through a deficit lens, emphasising roles such as “assisting education centres in dealing with many of the challenges that Aboriginal learners face” (p. 27), or, noting that “Elders were used to transmit traditional knowledge” (p. 29), thereby marginalising their broader leadership and authority. Strength-based, Indigenous-led international research is needed to co-design best-practice governance models, together with Elders and Tribal Leaders, to genuinely recognise Elders’ authority and promote culturally accountable higher education systems.

Our review of policy developments and literature demonstrates that Elders’ roles remain peripheral, under-recognised and insufficiently theorised. This gap underscores the need for research to examine and honour Elders’ authority within frameworks of governance, sovereignty, reform and self-determination. In the wake of the failed 2025 national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice Referendum, which sought to constitutionally enshrine an Indigenous advisory body to the Australian Parliament, the urgency of reclaiming Eldership within higher education governance is both timely and necessary. The Referendum’s defeat reflects broader structural resistance to Indigenous representation and highlights the need for alternative, community-led pathways to transformation.

Research design and methodology

This paper presents findings from the first stage of an Australian Research Council (ARC)-funded project, Yarruwala: Complex Ecosystems of Indigenous Higher Education Leadership. The research project examines Indigenous leadership roles in higher education and their possibilities for autonomy and self-determination through engagement with internal and external university stakeholders.

Figure 1: Stages and stakeholders engaged in the Yarruwala project

As outlined in Figure 1, the study has two phases. Phase 1 involves interviews with sector leaders, while Phase 2 analyses Indigenous-related content in university annual reports to assess outcomes and their alignment with participants' perspectives. This paper focuses on Stage 1 of Phase 1, investigating the relationships between Elders in Residence, Indigenous leaders and governance structures.

Decolonising race theory

We draw on Gamilaraay scholar Moodie's (2018) Decolonising Race Theory (DRT) to analyse findings from the first stage of our broader qualitative study. Building upon critical race theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), DRT resists "othering" logics and instead centres Indigenous sovereignty, relationality and futurity as a key analytical lens. This framework's emphasis on counter-storytelling informed our centring of Elders' insights and positioning of race, power and relationality as integral to understanding the institutional ecosystems within which Elders in Residence operate.

While all interrelated tenets of DRT are relevant to our findings and analysis, Moodie's (2018) third, sixth and seventh tenets were particularly significant. Tenet three, Sovereignty and Indigenous Futurity, supported us to understand Elders' roles not merely as cultural advisory or symbolic, but as expressions of sovereign knowledge-holding and active participation in sector transformation. It's emphasis on Indigenous futurity supported our analysis of the cohort's nation-building narratives and future-oriented reimaginings of the sector grounded in Indigenous worldviews. Tenet six, Relationality and Collectivism, supported our analysis of the cohort's relationalities with cultures, kin, communities and Country and how their relational labour sustains institutional and community ecosystems, challenging Eurocentric notions of individualism. Furthermore, the seventh tenet, Reparative Activism, supported

us to expose and challenge the inequities Elders in Residence experience, highlighting Elders' roles as agents of epistemic and structural resistance. DRT informed analysis by shaping both the interpretive lens and analytic priorities, guiding attention to sovereignty, relationality, counter storying and Indigenous futurity in Elders' narratives, and supporting an examination of how power, authority and governance are enacted within higher education ecosystems.

Positionality

This Indigenous-led study was guided by critical reflexivity, with our research team continually interrogating our positionality and the influence of identity and power on research processes. Interviews and analysis were conducted by an Indigenous early career researcher, supported by a team comprising of two other Indigenous Australian women and one non-Indigenous woman, all based in university settings.

As researchers, our team remained conscious of operating within institutional systems where Indigenous knowledge is often marginalised (Martin, 2008) and of the complex reality that the research team also represents in a higher education sector that is inherently colonial (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). We took care to avoid replicating historical harms through misrepresentation or misuse of data (Tuhivai Smith, 2012). Given the participants' status as Elders, members of a frequently over-researched population (Kovach, 2010), ethical engagement and critical reflexivity were prioritised to safeguard their knowledge. For example, interviews were guided by cultural protocols, with Elders determining the time, format and location. Consent was approached as an ongoing relational process and participants reviewed transcripts to ensure respectful representation. The research team engaged in reflexive journaling and debriefing to critically examine our positionalities and institutional complicities. These practices upheld the integrity of the research and supported careful navigation of the fragmented webs of power and accountability within institutional ecosystems.

Ethics, recruitment and participants

Ethical protocols guided all stages of this study, with emphasis on confidentiality, informed consent, integrity, privacy, respect and reciprocity. The research adhered to the AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2020) and received approval from Western Sydney University's Human Research Ethics Committee (H16435). To protect anonymity, pseudonyms were used for participants and institutions.

Elders in Residence were recruited using purposive, criterion-based sampling (Campbell et al., 2020) to identify participants with formal Elders in Residence appointments within Australian universities, ensuring alignment between the research aims and participants' cultural and institutional expertise. Identification involved a systematic review of Australian university websites, annual reports, Indigenous strategies and Reconciliation Action Plans to locate institutions with established Elders in Residence programs. Thirty-one potential participants were contacted via publicly available email addresses, emails to the universities' Indigenous centres and divisions, or online External Engagement with Elder Forms. As a result, six interviews were conducted. Non-participation was due to lack of response ($n = 12$), role cessation, health or other commitments ($n = 13$).

All participants identified as Indigenous Australians, with diverse cultural affiliations and connections to Country. Three held Traditional Owner⁶ status on the Country where their universities are located. Participants were employed at universities across three states and territories: New South Wales, Queensland and the Northern Territory. Appointments ranged from six months to 18 years, with participants averaging 33 years of experience in higher education across various roles.

Data collection and analysis

This study employed a qualitative approach (Silverman, 2013), conducting semi-structured interviews with each Elder in Residence ranging from 33–54 minutes. While all interviews were intended to be conducted in person, three were carried out over the phone. This method provided a flexible yet guided framework, enabling exploration of emergent themes and unanticipated insights through conversational engagement. Interviews were professionally transcribed, de-identified and returned to participants for review and approval.

Initial coding was conducted in NVivo 15 by the first author, enabling nuanced analysis across diverse Elder experiences and university contexts. Bazeley's (2013) framework guided the integration of design, data collection and interpretation. Following demographic coding, Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis was applied, using an iterative process to identify patterns and generate themes that reflected Elders' perspectives (Smith et al., 2009). Analysis followed an iterative and reflexive process, moving between inductive thematic coding and interpretive sense-making to identify patterns across Elders' accounts, with themes refined through team discussion and critical reflexivity. NVivo supported our visualisation of data and systematic analysis of large datasets. Thematic analysis was conducted inductively, followed by deductive coding aligned with core tenets of Moodie's (2018) DRT to examine relationships between codes and themes. Guided by theoretical commitments to sovereignty, relationality, counter-storying and Indigenous futurity, the Dhurrun model was developed as a conceptual synthesis grounded in our reflexive thematic analysis; rather than a single discrete theme, it integrates and visually represents the interwoven patterns across Elders' narratives to foreground their sovereign knowledge, relational accountability and future-oriented institutional work.

Limitations and future research direction

While this study offers insight into the diverse experiences of Elders in Residence within Australian universities, its findings contribute to a broader, evolving discourse on Indigenous leadership in higher education. Given the limited scope and sample size, the results are not universally generalisable and should not be seen as representative of all Elders' experiences. Longitudinal research with larger cohorts is needed to deepen understanding of Elders' roles in decolonising higher education and advancing Indigenous self-determination. Preliminary comparative engagement with literature from similarly colonised contexts, such as Canada, the United States and Aotearoa/New Zealand, suggests that further transnational analysis could illuminate shared challenges, best practices and opportunities for strengthening First Nations leadership globally.

⁶ The term "Traditional Owner" refers to Indigenous people who have ongoing cultural, spiritual and ancestral connections to specific lands and waters, often recognised through systems of Lore and custom. This status is distinct from legal ownership and is often acknowledged through native title processes or cultural authority within communities (Holcombe, 2004).

Findings and discussion

Through Moodie's (2018) DRT lens, we start to contextualise the current landscape of Elders in Residence programs in Australia, highlighting inconsistencies in appointments and the frequent absence of accurate public records. We then examine Elders' roles within higher education's layered ecosystems, revealing sector-wide lack of understanding and disparities in level of appointment, recognition and opportunities for governance participation. Across this analysis, we distinguish between Elders' relational and cultural influence within institutions, symbolic forms of recognition that confer visibility without decision-making authority, and structural institutional change reflected in formal governance roles, policies, resourcing and accountability mechanisms. The findings highlight Elders' concerns about the discretionary approach to their engagement, which undermines institutional relational integrity and weakens the broader higher education ecosystem.

Contextualising the current landscape of Elders in Residence programs in Australian universities

Our findings demonstrate Elders in Residence programs are dynamic and continually evolving, but inconsistently implemented across the sector. When examining Elders in Residence appointments sector wide, we found 30 of 42 institutions do not employ Elders in these positions and some also fail to maintain accurate public records about their appointments. Our review of university websites, reports and strategies revealed one late Elder continued to be publicly listed as the Elder in Residence despite having passed away months prior to data collection, while five others who had retired were still named as appointed on institutions' websites. The continued display of deceased Elders' names and images demonstrates a disregard for Indigenous protocols and Lore surrounding Sorry Business, exemplifying broader failures of relational accountability (Moreton-Robinson, 2009). Through a DRT lens, these misrepresentations reveal how Elder roles may be treated as symbolic markers rather than substantive commitments, reproducing patterns of tokenism and extractive use of Indigenous presence for institutional legitimacy. Beyond administrative oversight, the lack of accurate representation constitutes an epistemic violation, undermining Indigenous knowledge systems through neglect of fundamental cultural protocols.

We therefore found only 12 universities, representing less than 30% of the sector, that actively employ Elders in Residence; however, this figure may be somewhat inflated due to non-responses from 12 Elders, where continued employment has been assumed. Drawing on Indigenous scholarship on refusal and resistance (Moreton-Robinson, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2012), we cannot simply dismiss non-responses as they may signal mistrust, research fatigue or disengagement from university structures or communication channels. Among the Elders currently appointed across Australian universities, institutions employed varying numbers, ranging between one and seven Elders, with no clear correlation between Indigenous student/staff numbers and Elder appointments.

The multifaceted roles of Elders in Residence

The six Elders in our study described the multifaceted nature of their roles, operating as cultural authorities across intersecting academic, cultural and community domains within extensive networks of internal and external university stakeholders. While scope and responsibilities vary across institutions, the cohort emphasised that these roles, illustrated in Figure 2, represent the breadth of potential contribution when adequately supported. Not all Elders in the cohort were afforded opportunities to engage in every aspect of the work detailed below; rather, their roles are context-specific, shaped by

institutional structures, professional trajectories, and relational ties to local communities, Country, and cohorts of students, staff and executives.

Figure 2: Dhurrun model of layered, multi-faceted Indigenous Elders in Residence roles

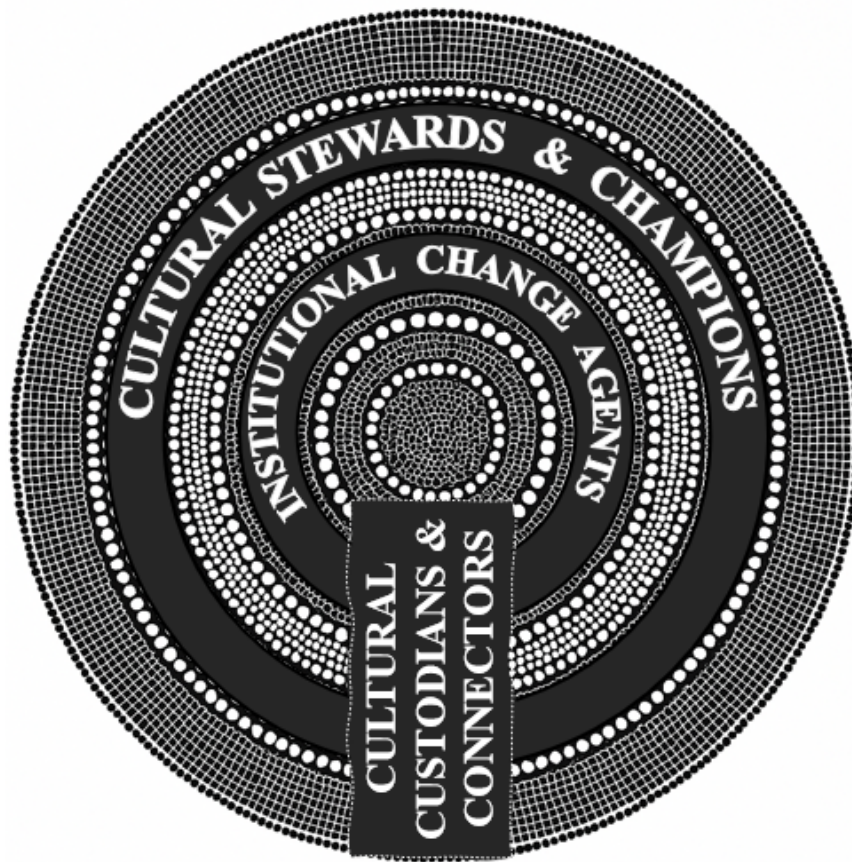


Figure 2 employs the dhurrun (the Wiradjuri word for stringybark) as a metaphor to illustrate the layered, adaptive responsibilities of Elders in Residence within higher education ecosystems. The heartwood represents roles as Institutional Change Agents, signifying Elders' centrality in shaping policy and driving systemic transformation. The outer rings depict Elders' roles as Cultural Stewards and Champions, emphasising their leadership in sustaining cultural integrity and advocacy. Extending across all rings are their roles as Cultural Custodians and Connectors, reflecting the complex, multilayered and overlapping nature of Eldership, bridging knowledge systems, fostering relationships and ensuring cultural accountability throughout institutional structures. Like the rings of the dhurrun, which vary in thickness and texture according to environmental conditions, Elders described their roles as expanding during seasons of growth and opportunity and contracting under pressures of policy, resource constraints or competing obligations. This metaphor underscores the dynamic, relational and adaptive nature of Eldership, deeply rooted in cultural authority yet responsive to shifting landscapes. Recognising this complexity is essential for universities seeking to honour Elders in Residence not as symbolic figures but as the heartwood of ethical, culturally accountable higher education.

Recognising Elders as Institutional Change Agents affirms their integral role in shaping and sustaining the university's cultural and intellectual landscape. Their contributions span multiple domains: in teaching and curriculum, Elders embed Indigenous knowledges and model culturally grounded pedagogies; through advisory leadership, they guide strategic planning and advise on cultural protocols; in research and knowledge exchange, many collaborate on projects, supervise Indigenous scholarship

and ensure ethical engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems. Additionally, Elders contribute to institutional advancement by advising on philanthropy, alumni and prospective student relations, campus development, and marketing, and they strengthen governance and engagement through participation in committees, ceremonial roles and cultural events. Collectively, these contributions embed Indigenous perspectives across curriculum, strategy, research, governance and institutional culture.

Positioning Elders as Cultural Stewards and Champions foregrounds their vital role in fostering wellbeing and cultural continuity within and beyond the institution. Through pastoral and kinship care, Elders provide cultural, emotional and spiritual support that nurtures belonging and strengthens community. We found their contributions to organisational development include leading cultural competency training, advising on human resourcing and supporting staff development to create culturally safe environments. Elders also transmit cultural knowledge by sharing traditions, stories and language with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, ensuring intergenerational knowledge transfer. In addition, they advance nation-building by advocating for self-determination, sovereignty and recognition within educational systems. Many also carry custodial responsibilities to Country and community as Traditional Owners, embedding these obligations into their leadership and advisory roles. Collectively, we found these practices affirm Elders' centrality in sustaining cultural integrity and promoting holistic wellbeing across and beyond universities.

Further, Elders play transformative roles as Cultural Custodians and Connectors in strengthening relationships and networks across institutional, community and global contexts. Through community engagement, they act as conduits between universities and Indigenous communities, including Traditional Owners, ensuring culturally grounded collaboration. They advance partnership development by building responsive relationships with schools, local organisations and community-controlled entities. At an international level, Elders foster knowledge exchange and intercultural dialogue with sector leaders and Tribal Leaders/Elders worldwide. Many engage in public engagements such as keynote speaking, cultural education, training and entrepreneurship, amplifying Indigenous voices in diverse forums. Many influence governance as they hold influential roles on boards at all levels, shaping policy and institutional directions. Some are also sector connectors as they serve as Elders in Residence, advisory members and campus Elders across multiple universities. Collectively, these contributions position Elders as vital connectors who sustain networks, promote cultural integrity, and extend institutional reach across local, national and global contexts

Despite the importance of these contributions, sector-wide scholarship on Elders in Residence remains absent, apart from Behrendt and colleagues' review (2012). Literature is yet to fully explore how Elders enact reform, honour community cultural wealth, fulfil relational obligations and (re)claim Indigenous authority within the academy, countering tokenistic and extractive practices with broader Indigenous communities. The following sections examine these contributions in greater depth.

Elders as agents of higher education reform

Positioned within complex institutional ecologies shaped by neoliberalism and colonial governance models (Page, 2021), the cohort consistently discussed their steadfast commitment to advancing equity reform. Echoing Chapman and Whiteford (2017), we find Eldership is not passive; rather, it demands deep institutional engagement and leadership. Aunty Possum affirms the distinctive nature of the role extending beyond traditional advisory capacities: "We aren't ancillary cultural advisors. Our leadership is central to shaping reform and changing how universities govern themselves, think, teach and relate to community."

Our findings suggest Elders in Residence function as cultural leaders, agents of reform and political actors, exposing and disrupting the structural conditions of settler-colonial universities. The cohort unanimously reflected on their efforts to prompt universities to “truth-tell” (Uncle Richie), “challenge colonial thoughts” (Uncle Gowonda), “change the system” (Uncle Gowonda), and “honour our authority and our knowledges” (Uncle Gowonda) within governance processes. Aunty Spookie explains:

So many of us are healing from generations of trauma. As a place of education, we must truth-tell about the true history here, about the shooting, poisoning, killing, all this and the ongoing racism in the board rooms, in lectures, on Country all over. We try to keep unis accountable and we push for lots of changes for our ways and our understandings to be at the front and to build trust.

We find Elders in Residence enact institutional reform in diverse ways by asserting sovereignty and advocating for the advancement of Indigenous-led visions that resist Eurocentric epistemologies and colonial claims to space, governance and knowledge.

Although Elders in Residence hold significant strategic influence, they are frequently portrayed in the literature primarily as cultural support figures, with limited recognition of their substantive contributions to institutional transformation. Notable exceptions include Lander’s (2021) discussion of the University of South Australia’s Purkarninthe program and Chapman and Whiteford’s (2017) account of Elders in Residence roles at Macquarie University. This study, therefore, extends existing literature by positioning Elders in Residence as central actors in institutional reform, alongside senior Indigenous leaders, within a fragile ecosystem of influence. While most Australian research focuses on senior Indigenous leadership and academic staff (Coates et al., 2022), empirical attention to Elders’ reformative roles remains limited, underscoring the need to recognise their strategic contributions to transforming higher education.

Elders honouring community cultural wealth

The analysis reveals Elders play a vital role in sustaining Indigenous cultural integrity within higher education. The cohort unanimously explained how they empower students, staff and researchers to navigate colonial systems while maintaining strong cultural identities. Aunty Possum notes:

Right from when mob⁷ come into university, we acknowledge the knowledge they bring and we all know that that knowledge is very empowering. Our role as Elders here in these unis is to support them to keep their cultural integrity and that’s very difficult to go out into that mainstream world in the university and keep your cultural integrity while you’re going through your education. The system is very colonial still.

By recognising the diverse knowledge and strengths Indigenous peoples bring with them and working to ensure this is not eroded within higher education contexts, we find the cohort enact, what Yosso (2005) theorises as, community cultural wealth. Uncle Richie emphasised the importance of “learning the rules of the higher education game”, a perspective widely shared across the cohort as essential for supporting Indigenous students and staff navigating university systems. This view aligns with Nakata’s (2007) observation that Indigenous peoples must continually “work out the language of ‘White’ people and their institutions that keep us at a disadvantage” (p. 161). The Elders’ dual labour of learning institutional

⁷ The term “mob” is an Indigenous expression commonly used to denote a collective of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. Within this study, participants employed the term to describe extended family, clan or broader community groups, as well as a means of self-identification.

norms while upholding cultural values enables strategic advocacy and relational support, ensuring Indigenous knowledge is recognised and preserved within the academy.

Fulfilling relational obligations

We found the cohort's roles are grounded in relational⁸ responsibilities. Elders articulated enacting obligations to "revitalise culture" (Aunty Possum), "pass on knowledge" and "teach values and lessons" (Aunty Gallah), and to "strengthen cultural identity and competence" (Uncle Gowonda) within higher education. Their yarns invoked concepts of family, kin, community and Country, alongside commitments to future generations, reflecting Indigenous epistemologies grounded in interconnectedness and nation-building. As Uncle Harry shared:

It's important that they understand more about our culture ... and value our knowledges, our ways of governing our nations, our connections to the land, especially going back 65,000 plus years ... I feel that is my responsibility as an Elder, to help empower all and to make sure it's across the whole uni wide ... together we need to plant the seeds of trees that we'll never sit in the shade of. We need to think about the next generations. This work we're doing 'ere is for your grandchildren's grandchildren bub.

Like Uncle Harry, the cohort's reflections on intergenerational and nation-building responsibilities align with Moodie's (2018) tenets of sovereignty and Indigenous futurity, positioning Elders' work as both restorative and future-oriented. Their enactment of sovereignty is expressed through presence, relational governance and the embedding of Indigenous values within the cultural and ethical architecture of universities. Elders described practices that disrupted hierarchical norms and fostered reciprocity, including "slowing discussions to make all voices heard", "encouraging collective decision-making" and "making them sit in circle". They also modelled relational knowledge transmission through "storytelling" (Uncle Gowonda) and by "inviting others to reflect on their relationship to Country" (Uncle Harry). Through these actions, Elders actively prompted and embodied relational approaches to thinking and learning across classrooms, boardrooms and professional development settings.

By framing leading and learning as an interconnected process grounded in obligations to culture, kin and Country, Elders in Residence play a critical role in guiding university stakeholders through reciprocal practices of listening, teaching and sitting together. Consistent with international scholarship on Elders and Tribal Leaders in Residence (Ducharme, 2013; Gifford & McEachern, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2020; Lewis, 2017), our findings reveal that the cohort's epistemological orientations challenge neoliberal, individualist models of education. In their place, Elders offer collective, place-based approaches to thinking, leading, governing and pedagogy, approaches that embed cultural integrity and relational accountability. Within the broader academic ecosystem, their enactment of relational obligations functions as counter-storytelling (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), contesting dominant institutional narratives and reframing pedagogical and governance practices.

Role for reclaiming Eldership in the academy

We found Elders in Residence programs also support the reaffirmation of educational authority within both universities and communities. Given the historical and ongoing intergenerational trauma inflicted by governments, missionaries and educational institutions, our findings demonstrate the importance of these roles in, what Uncle Gowonda described as, "reclaiming Eldership". While the participants

⁸ Quandamooka scholar Karen Martin (2008) describes Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing as grounded in "relationality"—a concept emphasising ones interconnected accountabilities to kin, Country, non-human beings, the cosmos and ancestors.

acknowledged knowledge transmission practices were never fully lost, they explained how these roles assist them in reasserting authority that has long been undermined by colonial education systems. Uncle Gowonda explains: “I see my role here as an Elder in Residence as being more about reclaiming Eldership, being involved in decision-making, providing that culturally strong leadership the way our Old People did.”

This aligns with Gifford and McEachern’s (2019) study of Alaskan Elders in Residence, which found these programs function as “a tool for healing the hurts associated with colonisation” (p. 49), countering historical efforts to remove Elders from educational roles and replace them with Eurocentric educators. Our findings therefore extend international scholarship (Drywater-Whitekiller, 2006; Fayant et al., 2010; Lewis, 2017), showing that Elders in Residence enact epistemic resistance (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), challenging Western knowledge hierarchies and asserting Indigenous authority as central to institutional legitimacy. Within the broader higher education ecosystem, we therefore find Elders in Residence serve not only as cultural custodians and knowledge transmitters but also as agents of structural change, reclaiming educational authority and contesting institutional inequities. This aligns with the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007), affirming Indigenous peoples’ rights to sustain, control and strengthen their knowledge systems.

Elders’ roles in bridging community and countering extractive practices

Beyond internal responsibilities, we find Elders in Residence serve as conduits between universities and Indigenous communities, undertaking roles in community engagement, cultural transmission, partnership development, advocacy, nation-building and, in some instances, international collaboration. These roles reflect deep relational accountability across institutional and community contexts. As Aunty Possum explains:

I make sure my voice and the communities’ voices are listened to with this. I am the connection to community both ways and am accountable to both ... You see, you start to build trust and respect with the community for the university and keep them up to date about what happens.

Like Aunty Possum, when reflecting on relationships with external stakeholders the cohort emphasised the importance of reciprocity, consent and cultural integrity, often intervening to “pull them up” when institutional practices became extractive or tokenistic. While limited literature examines the attributes and skills Elders in Residence must possess, we find these roles demand considerable intercultural competence and political acuity, requiring navigation of competing institutional and community logics. Viewed through a DRT lens, our findings extend literature by evidencing Elders enacting institutional critique, working to disrupt tokenistic practices and counter extractive uses of Indigenous knowledges in higher education ecosystems (Fredericks, 2013).

Inconsistencies in Elders in Residence experiences and the need for sector-wide protocols

Misunderstandings, marginalisation and governance silos

Despite the breadth and significance of their contributions, Elders in Residence reported widespread misunderstanding of their roles, particularly by university executives. The cohort highlighted the need to address misconceptions about their roles being “add-ons” and “symbolic” by honouring the cultural competencies, attributes and breadth of institutional knowledge, community cultural wealth, and relational capital they hold with decades of experience working across university–community relations. Their varied experiences across higher education institutions reveal systemic inconsistencies in how their

roles are valued and enacted. For example, in some settings, Elders hold central responsibilities, such as leading strategic planning, convening all Indigenous staff and student meetings, contributing to budget processes and facilitating cultural events such as NAIDOC Week. Others strengthen external partnerships by leading initiatives such as informal lunch sessions with cultural providers, engagement workshops with incarcerated mob or coordinating career days in local communities, embedding universities within broader social ecosystems. While no Elders held formal governance roles within university senates or boards, some described strong relationships with executives where they were often invited to present at senate, lead cultural competency workshops for senior executives and meet weekly one-on-one with the Vice-Chancellor. Yet, in stark contrast, others describe being “excluded” and “disrespected” by the university executive, noting senior leadership at their institution is disinterested in engaging Indigenous authority beyond tokenistic measures. As Uncle Lashes observes:

It’s great that I have the relationships to present at senate and have a strong voice in decision-making, but I am aware others may not ... We need to develop the capacity of the Elders program broadly though and secure the lines of leadership and governance, so irrelevant of whoever steps into my role they can have the same opportunities. We need to be creating our one level of high success and making sure all unis hold space for Elders across the board.

Recognition also varied, with one-third of participants receiving university-based honorary awards, while others received little formal acknowledgement. This is problematic, as many felt this uneven recognition highlights tension between the conferral of Western academic credentials and the ongoing disregard for Indigenous Elders’ knowledges.

Inadequate benchmarks for Eldership: Position, pay and presence

Disparities in HEW⁹ classifications further reflected institutional undervaluing of Eldership. While most were benchmarked at HEW-level seven, some Elders reported uncertainty about their formal classification, while others were positioned below this average and described “pushing to be tapped up to that next level”. The cohort unanimously highlighted the inadequacy of current HEW frameworks in capturing the depth of cultural authority and responsibility inherent to Eldership. As Uncle Harry reflects:

I’m a HEW seven now, but up until recently I was a four. I was disappointed because our Elders positions are important and should be recognised ... It meant a lot to have a senior leader act as my champion and raise my salary to better reflect my wisdom and commitment.

While remuneration was discussed, Elders consistently prioritised cultural obligations over financial incentives. As Uncle Gowonda explains, “I do my role for my cultural responsibilities ... if I provided similar advice in the private sector they’d offer bigger money.”

While advisory work in the private sector may command significantly higher remuneration, Elders consistently framed their engagement in higher education as an extension of cultural responsibility and kinship obligations. This dynamic reflects broader scholarship showing that Indigenous peoples frequently prioritise roles grounded in care, relationality and community service over financially lucrative opportunities (Altman, 2009; Fogarty et al., 2018; Jordan et al., 2010).

⁹ HEW (Higher Education Worker) levels are a classification system used in the Australian higher education sector to define the responsibilities and skill requirements for roles within universities.

Workload expectations and campus presence across institutions also varied. While one Elder was employed four days per week, most averaged two to three days, yet were routinely expected to undertake responsibilities far beyond these allocations. Despite limited remuneration, many, like Aunty Gallah, described daily campus presence to support events and community engagement. Innovative models, such as job-sharing, enabled continuous Elder presence, whereas constrained resources in other contexts limited engagement. Several Elders noted that operational demands, though institutionally celebrated, often restricted opportunities for strategic and governance-level contributions “where we’d have more impact”. These discrepancies highlight uneven recognition of Elders’ authority and expose racialised institutional logics that overextend and undervalue Indigenous labour.

Structural ambiguity and institutional discomfort

The inconsistencies in Elder in Residences experiences highlight the lack of structural support and formal mechanisms, leaving Elder participation often contingent upon institutional discretion rather than embedded sector-wide recognition. Uncle Lashes explains the structural ambiguities and racialised tensions surrounding the role:

There’s a lot of uncertainty when you walk into the role. Universities are nervous about telling Elders what they can and can’t do and a lot of Elders haven’t understood how to work the uni system, so all of this together is actually making our jobs harder.

We find this ambiguity reflects institutional discomfort in locating Indigenous authority within settler-defined governance systems, often resulting in ad hoc arrangements that undermine Elders’ roles.

Towards sector-wide protocols and equity

Our findings align with Chapman and Whiteford’s (2017) notion of the role carrying a quality of “being with” rather than consisting of discrete, task-based duties and honouring the heterogeneity of Eldership across contexts. Yet, at the same time, the cohort underscores the need for sector-wide role descriptions and best-practice protocols for engagement to be co-designed and formalised. As Uncle Lashes explains:

If we have clear job descriptions, clear PDs, clear best-practice engagement protocols that have all been developed with Elders leading it and universities, Elders and communities endorsing it, it will take away a lot of the messiness. We need to have open conversations and we need to be leading the discussions so other Elders who get future jobs don’t have to make it up on the run ... This is equity because no non-Indigenous leader doesn’t have the structures and clear descriptions of their roles.

Therefore, we find the absence of formalised structures reproduces epistemic inequities, subordinating Indigenous governance to institutional discomfort and administrative ambiguity. From a decolonising and critical race perspective, these inconsistencies constitute institutional racism (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Moodie, 2018), particularly when non-Indigenous leaders benefit from clarity denied to Elders. Altogether, we find the sector’s current patchwork approach to engaging and supporting Elders in Residence programs not only weakens the relational fabric of institutions but diminishes higher education’s broader ecosystemic capacity to sustain Indigenous authority. Restoring integrity to this ecosystem requires durable, co-designed frameworks that position Eldership as foundational to the cultural and ethical legitimacy of universities.

Conclusion

As the Australian higher education sector reconsiders its civic and cultural responsibilities in the aftermath of the failed national Voice Referendum and renewed sector-wide commitments, our research finds Elders in Residence are central to advancing Indigenous leadership and relational accountability. Our findings show Elders contribute across academic, cultural, community and political domains, catalysing institutional transformation while restoring Indigenous authority within governance ecosystems that remain deeply colonial.

Drawing on Moodie's (2018) DRT lens, particularly the tenets of sovereignty, relationality and resistance, we show how the relational governance practices of Elders in Residence sustain community wellbeing and simultaneously critique systemic inequities, effecting change from within. Methodologically, these frameworks enabled us to trace how Elders' experiences expose persistent asymmetries in recognition, remuneration and participation.

If universities are genuinely committed to honouring Indigenous knowledges and leadership, Elders in Residence roles must evolve beyond symbolic or ad hoc appointments. Instead, they require structured, equitable and nationally recognised frameworks that reflect their cultural authority and contributions to systemic reform. While the increasing presence of Elders in Residence signals progress, work is needed to embed their knowledges and leadership within the core operations of universities.

As emphasised in the *Australian Universities Accord: Interim Report* (O'Kane et al., 2023) and the *Australian Universities Accord: Final Report* (O'Kane et al., 2024), embedding Indigenous knowledges is both urgent and necessary. Recognising Elders as keystone stakeholders within the higher education ecosystem positions them as indispensable to reweaving fragmented governance and advancing a more ethical, socially just and culturally accountable sector.

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