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Indigenous higher education sector: the evolution of recognised Indigenous Leaders within Australian Universities

Stacey Kim Coates[1], Michelle Trudgett[2] and Susan Page[3]

[1]Western Sydney University, Bankstown Campus, Bullecourt Avenue, Milperra, Bankstown, New South Wales 2214, Australia; [2]Western Sydney University, Building EZ.2.02, Parramatta South Campus, Victoria Rd, Rydalmere, New South Wales 2116, Australia and [3]Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales 2007, Australia

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Author for correspondence:
Stacey Coates, E-mail: 15200831@student.westernsydney.edu.au

Abstract

There is clear evidence that Indigenous education has changed considerably over time. Indigenous Australians' early experiences of 'colonialised education' included missionary schools, segregated and mixed public schooling, total exclusion and 'modified curriculum' specifically for Indigenous students which focused on teaching manual labour skills (as opposed to literacy and numeracy skills). The historical inequalities left a legacy of educational disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Following activist movements in the 1960s, the Commonwealth Government initiated a number of reviews and forged new policy directions with the aim of achieving parity of participation and outcomes in higher education between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Further reviews in the 1980s through to the new millennium produced recommendations specifically calling for Indigenous Australians to be given equality of access to higher education; for Indigenous Australians to be employed in higher education settings; and to be included in decisions regarding higher education. This paper aims to examine the evolution of Indigenous leaders in higher education from the period when we entered the space through to now. In doing so, it will examine the key documents to explore how the landscape has changed over time, eventually leading to a number of formal reviews, culminating in the *Universities Australia 2017–2020 Indigenous Strategy* (Universities Australia, 2017).

Introduction

It is indisputable that Indigenous Australians are significantly under-represented in the higher education sector (Madden *et al.*, 2005; Trudgett, 2009, 2013; Rigney, 2010, 2011; Day *et al.*, 2015; Page *et al.*, 2017). As a colonised country, it is important to highlight the fact that Australian universities were initially established as 'intellectual constructs of the British homeland' (Ma Rhea and Russell, 2012, p. 18). This resulted in the preliminary exclusion of Indigenous Australians at the time educational institutions were being established across the country. Australia's First Nation people were excluded within the field of education on two counts; absence of Indigenous knowledges within 'Australian' curriculum (though this was probably not widely realised until the new millennium when institutions began more firmly advocating for the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in tertiary curriculum), and prohibition from obtaining any form of 'formal' education. While an education policy, known as the 'Clean, Clad and Courteous' policy was introduced in 1884 allowing Indigenous students to attend their nearest public school, providing they were 'habitually clean, decently clad and they conduct themselves with propriety', this meant school administrators could exclude Indigenous students from the classroom if they were perceived to have health and/or hygiene issues (Fletcher, 1989, p. 74). Furthermore, in 1902, Government schools were directed to exclude Indigenous students if complaints were received from non-Indigenous parents, under the 'Exclusion on Demand' policy. In cases like this, most Indigenous students were then forced to attend segregated 'Aboriginal schools' run by unqualified teachers (Hogarth, 2016). Sadly, the 'Exclusion on Demand' policy was maintained well into the 1970s. While the policy is no longer in operation, such discriminatory policies are more tenacious and have negative long-term effects, well after the policy expired.

Varying degrees of exclusion continued right up into the early 1960s, to a time when Australia saw a number of activist movements that called for the self-management and self-determination of Indigenous Australians. In response, the Commonwealth Government initiated a number of formal reviews and introduced new policies that gave Indigenous Australians a stronger voice in regards to their own affairs and future directions within the educational realm. National Reviews such as the 1989 *National Aboriginal Education Policy* (AEP), the 2008 *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley *et al.*, 2008) and the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt *et al.*, 2012) have investigated the 'gaps' between Indigenous Australians

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and non-Indigenous Australians in higher education. Interestingly, such reviews echo similar recommendations to one another in relation to achieving parity of participation and outcomes in higher education between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Furthermore, such recommendations are not limited to increasing the number of Indigenous Australians to merely receive a higher education. Instead, the recommendations go on to include the need to increase the number of Indigenous academic staff across Australian universities. In 2011, Universities Australia (UA), together with the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC), issued the National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities (Universities Australia, 2011). While the framework aimed at embedding cultural competency across the higher education sector, it also identified that Indigenous people are under-represented as employees across the sector, at all levels. Therefore, in an attempt to galvanise action across the sector, UA launched a specific Indigenous strategy (Universities Australia, 2017), designed to improve outcomes in higher education, across key areas such as curriculum, research, student support and importantly, workforce. This paper will highlight some of the critical political movements and policy changes that assisted with increasing the presence of Indigenous leaders in the higher education system, and provide a robust discussion on how recognised Indigenous leadership across the sector has evolved over time. Notably, while 'Indigenous leadership' exists within a number of contexts, e.g. elders within Indigenous communities (Ford *et al.*, 2018), for the purpose of this paper, when referring to Indigenous leaders, it is in the context of the systematic hierarchical structures within Australian universities.

First appearance in education: Indigenous Australians seen but not heard

It is crucial to recognise that the historical and philosophical foundations of Australian education were originally formed on the basis of British pedagogy. The extensive knowledge Indigenous people held about the land and their cultural practices was invisible to British settlers (Ma Rhea and Russell, 2012). Consequently, information pertaining to Indigenous culture did not feature in the university curriculum until the 1890s, 40 years after the first university in Australia was established (Sheils, 1963; Peterson, 1990). Even then, Indigenous content was only covered within the studies of anthropology and rarely extended beyond an introductory chapter in history textbooks (Russell, 2001). Sadly, this limited content continued to be taught right up to the 1960s. In fact, Australian Indigenous studies did not emerge as a discrete cognate area until 1961, when the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS, later to be known as the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, AIATSIS) was established and tasked with embedding Indigenous knowledges in the curriculum (Ma Rhea and Russell, 2012). While the federally funded institute was underpinned by a concern for preserving what was perceived to be the disappearance of Indigenous culture, it was not until 1970 that the first Indigenous Australian was appointed as an 'active agent' in the institute (Ma Rhea and Russell, 2012, p. 19). When the AIAS was initially established, people who had 'authoritative knowledge' pertaining to Indigenous culture were called upon for their input, however, no Indigenous person was included (Ma Rhea and Russell, 2012, p. 19). Unfortunately, this was typical for the time. It has been well-documented that for the majority of the 1960s, non-Indigenous Australians were still speaking on behalf of Indigenous Australians when attempting to 'improve' all aspects of Indigenous education (Williams, 2013; Holt, 2016; Street *et al.*, 2017).

Aboriginal Studies units and bridging programmes: subtle emergence of Indigenous leadership

The introduction of programmes and support mechanisms to encourage Indigenous Australians to participate in higher education became prominent in the 1970s. As mentioned, the AIAS primarily focused on curriculum content relating to 'traditional' Indigenous culture. Consequently, Professor Colin Tatz believed the AIAS gave little attention to contemporary issues surrounding Indigenous Australians (i.e. inequities accessing education) and this led to the establishment of the Centre for Research into Aboriginal Affairs (CRAA) at Monash University in 1964. The CRAA was one of the first documented Aboriginal Studies units to be established within an Australian university. Over a number of years, the CRAA developed a series of bridging programmes to ensure Indigenous students were academically prepared to undertake tertiary studies. It was during this period, the first full-time Indigenous Director of an Aboriginal Studies unit was appointed in an Australian university; Professor Colin Bourke was appointed as the Indigenous Director of the CRAA at Monash University in 1977 (Ma Rhea and Russell, 2012).

Remarkably, eventually every university across Australia followed the suit and Aboriginal Studies units became a standard feature in all universities across the country (Ma Rhea and Russell, 2012; Holt, 2016). The functions of the Aboriginal Studies units, often referred to as 'Aboriginal enclaves' (Holt and Morgan, 2016) varied; some included a support function for Indigenous students, while others operated as teaching and research centres, with a focus to develop academic programmes. Governance and unit 'business models' changed over time, in order to meet the needs of the Indigenous community and higher education institutions (Holt and Morgan, 2016).

During the period when universities across the country were establishing Aboriginal Studies units in a move to transition Indigenous Australians into higher education, the Aboriginal Task Force (ATF) was established in 1973 at the South Australian Institute of Technology (SAIT) with the aim to deliver Australia's first Indigenous tertiary programme in the field of social welfare (Bin-Sallik, 1990, 2003; Rigney, 2001; Trudgett, 2009). In terms of 'transitioning', the ATF provided a means of entry to SAIT for Indigenous students who did not have the standard prerequisites for entry into tertiary-level institutions (Anderson, 2015). Indigenous students proved they were able to succeed in higher educational studies when provided with opportunities and culturally safe environments (Bin-Sallik, 2003). While the programme proved to be successful and the presence of Indigenous Australians participating in higher education increased (Bin-Sallik, 2003), Indigenous Australians were still significantly under-represented in the higher education system in comparison to non-Indigenous Australians (Behrendt *et al.*, 2012). It was widely recognised that there was still work to be done, which resulted in a number of reviews and changes to the policy.

Key policies: repeated recommendations to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians

The reviews conducted over the past 45 years have echoed similar recommendations that outline an aim to achieve parity of

participation and outcomes in higher education between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (see Perry and Holt, 2018). Examining the 1989 *National Aboriginal Education Policy* (AEP), later to become the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (NATSIEP), as a starting point, the policy sought to achieve equity of access and participation in education (Holt and Morgan, 2016). It formed the basis for co-operation and collaboration between the Commonwealth and educational institutions, in partnership with Indigenous Australians (Hogarth, 2016). The long-term goals of the policy were to facilitate the development of educational strategies that met the culturally targeted educational needs of Indigenous Australians, by the year 2000. The AEP described 21 common and agreed national goals which were divided across four main themes: goal 1–6 highlighted the need for the 'involvement of Aboriginal people in educational decision-making', goal 7–9 focused on 'equality of access to educational services', goal 10–12 called for 'equity of educational participation' and goal 13–21 centred around 'equitable and appropriate educational outcomes' (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989, p. 14–15). The specifics of the 21 goals will not be canvassed here. However, it is illuminating and instructive to feature goal 4 and goal 16 in precise detail:

> 'Increase the number of Aboriginal people employed as administrators, teachers, researchers, and student services officers in technical and further education colleges and higher education institutions' (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989, p. 14);
>
> 'Enable Aboriginal students to attain the same graduation rates from award courses in technical and further education, and in higher education, as for other Australians' (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989, p.15).

Notably, 2 years following the release of the AEP, the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (Johnston, 1991) was initiated to investigate the number of Aboriginal deaths in custody across a period of 10 years (i.e. 1980–1989). While the main focus of the Royal Commission applied to the operation of the criminal justice system, and included a staggering total of 339 recommendations, Recommendations 289–299 specifically highlighted the need to educate Indigenous Australians for the future (Johnston, 1991). While each recommendation is important, Recommendation 299 is significant as it explicitly refers to, and calls for the support of, the long-term goals noted in the AEP:

(a) At every stage of the application of the National Aboriginal Education Policy the utmost respect be paid to the first long-term goal expressed in the policy, that is: To establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal parents and community members in decisions regarding the planning, delivery, and evaluation of pre-school, primary, and secondary education services for their children.
(b) It be recognised that the aims of the Policy are not only to achieve equity in education for Aboriginal people but also to achieve a strengthening of Aboriginal identity, decision making and self-determination; and
(c) It is unlikely that either of these aims can be achieved without the achieving of the other (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, Johnston, 1991, Volume 4, p. 351).

Following the recommendations in the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths* in Custody (Johnston, 1991), the AEP underwent a national review in 1994. This was an extensive process that included the analysis of statistical data, public consultations and examination of written submissions. The Review found widespread support for the AEP; however, despite an improvement in educational experiences over a period of 5 years, Indigenous Australians continued to be the most educationally disadvantaged group across the country (National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. *Summary and Recommendations; Final Report*, 1994). The findings published within the *Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* resulted in a total of 44 recommendations. While issues of equity and the need for self-determination in education were central themes, the limited power Indigenous Australians held in regards to decision-making was raised as a concern. Therefore, the Review recommended all institutions responsible for providing educational services for Indigenous students should appoint an Indigenous Australian or advisory committee to ensure Indigenous views were reflected in decisions (National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. *Summary and Recommendations; Final Report*, 1994).

There is still work to be done: the call to give Indigenous Australians a voice

Whilst it is clear the *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* recognised the need to have more Indigenous Australians not only secure university qualifications, there was also a call to ensure Indigenous people were active decision-makers, particularly in relation to the delivery and leadership within the institutions. However, over the decade following the Review (i.e. the period up to 2004), it was frequently reported that there was still significant work to be done in order to achieve this (Schwab, 1995; Rigney, 2002; Bin-Sallik, 2003; Sanders, 2004). Likewise, in 2003, Bin-Sallik examined the development of the Australian Indigenous higher education sector over a 30-year period, starting from the early 1970s. Bin-Sallik argued that 'Indigenous participation within the higher education sector has been a very difficult process' (Bin-Sallik, 2003, p. 21). According to Bin-Sallik (2003), Australian Universities promoted the fact that they employed Indigenous academics; however, these Indigenous academics were excluded from the major decision-making structures of their institutions. Furthermore, Bin-Sallik (2003) believed that it was high-ranking non-Indigenous staff who made most of the important decisions. Having recognised this, Bin-Sallik (2003) called for each Australian university to appoint an Indigenous Pro-Vice Chancellor.

> 'Until we have our own Indigenous Pro-Vice Chancellors to oversee Indigenous issues, universities will continue to make decisions on our behalf and to date these decisions have not all been positive' (Bin-Sallik, 2003, p. 27).

However, one key obstacle was the reality that there was the small pool of Indigenous people with high-level qualifications that could easily take up such roles. In fact, Trudgett *et al.* (2016) report that the first Indigenous Australian to receive a doctoral qualification was Bill Jonas, who graduated from the University of Papua New Guinea in 1980. While there has been a rise in the number of Indigenous Australians enrolled in higher education (Page *et al.*, 2017) and the pool of Indigenous Australians to receive a doctoral qualification has increased, post the new millennium (Trudgett *et al.*, 2016), despite the growth in doctoral

completions by Indigenous Australians, the overall percentage of domestic completions remains significantly below the target rate of 2.2% (Behrendt *et al*., 2012, p. 11). However, pleasingly, a growing number of Indigenous Australians now hold positions of Dean and Pro Vice-Chancellor (Page *et al*., 2017). In 2009, Charles Darwin University (CDU) was the first to appoint an Indigenous Pro Vice-Chancellor, Professor Steven Larkin. Taking this a step further, in 2011, the University of Sydney appointed Professor Shane Houston to the role of Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Indigenous Strategy and Services (Page *et al*., 2017). In fact, at the time of writing this paper, 24 universities have a dedicated senior Indigenous position at either the Dean, Pro-Vice Chancellor or Deputy Vice-Chancellor level. However, the implementation of these roles remains largely *ad hoc*. While there is a growing literature investigating the concepts of Indigenous leadership and governance within Indigenous communities and a range of business and political settings (e.g. Ivory, 2005; Smith and Hunt, 2008; White, 2010), research on Indigenous leadership within universities is much more limited. The question on how to best integrate Indigenous Australians into the overall architecture of the institution still remains.

Turning our attention to Indigenous higher education after the new millennium, the IHEAC was a significant representative body, inaugurated in 2004. The Council, comprised of senior Indigenous academics, was responsible for providing policy advice to the Australian Government (through the Minister for Education) concerning higher education, research and training issues in relation to Indigenous higher education students and staff. In their 2006 Conference Report, the Council sought to develop strategies for improving Indigenous higher education outcomes. The *Partnerships, Pathways and Policies, Improving Indigenous Education Outcomes* report (IHEAC, 2006) examined how to get Indigenous students interested, enrolled and completing higher education degrees. The impact of strong leadership at the Vice-Chancellor level, increasing teacher understanding of Indigenous education issues and improving the experience of Indigenous students on campus were all highlighted as areas worth examining.

Furthermore, in March 2008, The Hon Julia Gillard MP, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education at the time, initiated a *Review of Australian Higher Education* to examine the future direction of the higher education sector (Bradley *et al*., 2008). Interestingly, the Review (often referred to as the *Bradley Review*) was not specific to Indigenous Australians. However, based on a large number of submissions suggesting a national approach to improving Indigenous participation in higher education, the following recommendation was made:

The Bradley Review made one crucial recommendation:

> Recommendation 30
>
> That the Australian Government regularly review the effectiveness of measures to improve higher educational access and outcomes for Indigenous people in consultation with the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (Bradley *et al*., 2008, p. xxiii).

That recommendation from the *Bradley Review* sparked a call for an Indigenous-specific higher education review. This led to the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt *et al*., 2012), which is commonly referred to as the *Behrendt Review*. As part of the review, Behrendt *et al*., (2012) undertook a comprehensive consultation process with the sector. This involved meeting with Vice-Chancellors, other senior university representatives including Indigenous Australian students, graduates and academic staff. Based on their findings, the Panel provided 35 recommendations to the Australian government, pertaining to the access and outcomes of higher education for Indigenous Australians. While the recommendations ultimately aimed to achieve parity in higher education for Indigenous Australians, both students and staff, the Panel's vision was much broader. The Panel wanted higher education to become a natural pathway for Indigenous Australians as they believed success in higher education would provide the foundations that could ultimately close the socio-economic gap between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians. The Panel believed closing the socio-economic gap would contribute to improving '*Australia's broader wellbeing and economic prosperity*' (Behrendt *et al*., 2012, p. 11). In order to achieve this vision, the Panel called on the higher education sector to take a leading role in building capacity within Indigenous Australian communities while making a meaningful contribution to closing the gap.

Overlapping with the *Behrendt Review*, UA undertook a project with the IHEAC and published the *National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (Universities Australia, 2011). It sought to provide the Australian higher education sector with a framework which would allow it to embed Indigenous cultural competency at the institutional level. It found that 'producing graduates invested with the foundational knowledge, skills and attributes of Indigenous cultural competency…will help to close the gap in the socio-economic disparity experienced by the majority of Indigenous Australians' (Universities Australia, 2011, p. 181). It also found that Indigenous people are under-represented as employees of Australian universities at all levels, and this under-representation sends a negative message to students and employees, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Building on the *National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (Universities Australia, 2011), as part of a wider Government commitment to closing the employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the IHEAC continued to work in collaboration with UA to develop the *National Indigenous Higher Education Workforce Strategy* (IHEAC, 2011). The Council examined strategies designed to ensure Indigenous higher education students complete their research, have a positive experience within the university environment and are then better placed to secure employment within the higher education sector. The Workforce Strategy (IHEAC, 2011) also strongly recommends that universities treat the employment of Indigenous academics as a professional or business goal, rather than a moral issue. Not doing so would deny both the wealth of cultural knowledge and professional skills that Indigenous academics bring with them. The Workforce Strategy (IHEAC, 2011) also makes it clear that active steps to address inequality must be taken within the higher education sector, as merely treating Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and academics as 'equals' will not solve the current disparity.

Commissioned by the Panel for *The Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt *et al*., 2012), the *On Stony Ground Report* (Moreton-Robinson *et al*., 2011) looked specifically at governance within Australian universities (with the purpose of informing the Panel's deliberations). The Report examined Indigenous participation and direct influence on university

executive functions, and the strategies, programmes and objectives used to increase Indigenous outcomes. One of the recommendations of the Report was for all Australian universities to adopt the *National Indigenous Higher Education Workforce Strategy* (IHEAC, 2011). The Report also recommended an Indigenous 'presence' at all levels of the university. Paradoxically, the call to build Indigenous presence echoes the recommendations made 17 years earlier, in the 1994 *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* report. Furthermore, it was recognised yet again, 2 years on, when Gunstone (2013) argued the same point:

> 'The involvement of Indigenous people in university leadership and governance is an essential factor in addressing both disempowerment and the educational aspirations of Indigenous people in universities' (Gunstone, 2013, p. 1).

Gunstone (2013) clearly highlighted the critical importance of ensuring Indigenous Australians are included in governance and leadership within Australian universities. However, it seems this particular point had been raised several times previously (Johnston, 1991; Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1994; Bin-Sallik, 2003; Behrendt et al., 2012).

Clearly visible: observed advancements made in Indigenous leadership

In 2017, Page *et al.* examined Indigenous leadership, students and curriculum in more detail and traced the advancements made in Indigenous higher education over the past three decades (Page *et al.*, 2017). Pleasingly, they reported that by 2017, the number of Indigenous students in higher education settings had increased to record levels. More importantly, they reported an increase in senior Indigenous staff employed by Australian universities (Page *et al.*, 2017). Improvements in both areas were seen as an achievement born in the Indigenous Centres (previously referred to as Aboriginal Studies units) and advanced by the IHEAC.

Nevertheless, despite Indigenous student enrolment numbers increasing, Indigenous students were still less likely to complete their undergraduate degree and remained woefully underrepresented in postgraduate courses (Page *et al.*, 2017). More importantly to this discussion, while appointments of Indigenous Australians to senior positions within Australian Universities were slowly increasing, they reported little to no consistency between universities (Page *et al.*, 2017). It was a clear indication that there was still a lot of work to be done in regards to building Indigenous leadership across the sector. Utilising current data and historical trends, Page *et al.* (2017) made some positive predictions about the state of play in 2040. They cautioned however that for these predictions to eventuate, there must be commitment and investment by Australian universities.

Galvanised action: Indigenous leadership in higher education continues to forge forward

UA, in collaboration with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consortium Higher Education (NATSIHEC), developed the inaugural *Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2017–2020* (Universities Australia, 2017). The Strategy prescribed a number of initiatives and outlined common goals to bring universities across the country together. While the Strategy listed multiple objectives, the main objective of the Strategy was clearly articulated; the Strategy sought to increase the number of Indigenous Australians participating in higher education, not only as students and graduates, but also as academic and research staff, with a strong focus on Indigenous leadership (Universities Australia, 2017). As the peak sector body, UA pledged their commitment to carry out a number of activities to ensure their targets were met. Additionally, the Strategy called all members of UA to commit to undertaking a set of similar actions that would ultimately lead to achieving parity. Significantly, one of the recommendations within the Strategy states:

> 'This explicitly includes plans to increase the number of such staff to three per cent of the total workforce and for the employment of at least one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person in a senior executive role' (Universities Australia, 2017, p. 32).

While the intention of the Strategy was well articulated, some sections were considered superficial, therefore require further development in the next iteration. In order to demonstrate a meaningful commitment, UA is encouraged to think more deeply about the important aspects in our sector, such as Indigenous research. This is significant as it is widely accepted that Indigenous research with a strong evidence base is critical to improving the health, wellbeing and educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Dudgeon *et al.*, 2010; Behrendt *et al.*, 2012).

Unlike any of the preceding policies and reviews concerning Indigenous higher education, UA committed to obtaining feedback from universities on an annual basis. In order to monitor advances made and keep members accountable, universities would be requested to provide details of their progress towards meeting the commitments made within the Strategy. Findings from the information gathered would then be de-identified and publicly released within an annual report (Universities Australia, 2017). At the time this paper was written, UA had recently released the '*Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy First Annual Report*' (Universities Australia, 2019). The 85-page document details the 'major strides' achieved and claims it 'was a game-changing legacy for our nation' (Universities Australia, 2019, p. 3).

Despite reported progress, drawing on sector-wide statistics and qualitative information provided via survey responses, UA recognised there was still significant work to be done (Universities Australia, 2019). While it was reported that there was an increase of focus with regards to incorporating research and employment strategies within core policy documents, feedback indicated the majority of universities were still in the developmental stages of formalising an 'Indigenous Research Strategy' (Universities Australia, 2019). This is significant given it is recognised that embedding Indigenous strategies into overarching institutional strategic and business models can be an effective way to advance Indigenous higher education (IHEAC, 2011; Behrendt *et al.*, 2012; Universities Australia, 2019). It is also acknowledged that having an Indigenous Research Strategy in place provides universities with the opportunity to identify gaps within their own institution, recognise where targets have been met (and possibly exceeded), and provide a focus for new priorities. Furthermore, Indigenous research strategies afford institutions with the opportunity to take a 'whole-university' approach, to which accountability can be shared across Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues (Universities Australia, 2019).

Armed with that knowledge, one may become sceptical as to whether 'major strides' have indeed been made.

Concluding statements: the evolution of Indigenous leadership in higher education continues

Putting our argument into context, at the time Universities Australia (2019) published their first report, disappointingly only 19 out of the 39 universities had appointed an Indigenous senior executive and much of the 'heavy lifting continues to be done by the Indigenous centres or units of universities' (Universities Australia, 2019, p. 7). In one respect, this is undoubtedly an advancement in Indigenous leadership across the sector and creation of such positions certainly indicates that universities are attempting, to some degree, to incorporate Indigenous Australians into the overall architecture of the institution. However, implementation remains largely *ad hoc*, some positions have been short-lived and recruitment has been challenging (Page *et al*., 2017). Unfortunately, the reasons for the inconsistency are unknown, it seems 'Indigenous leadership' is an area that requires further investigation. According to Trudgett (2013), while there has been some considerable work already undertaken surrounding Indigenous higher education, the majority of research investigates student experience and support, rather than advancements within Indigenous leadership. How to best integrate and involve Indigenous Australians into the leadership structures of institutions is an area that requires further investigation. Thankfully, this paper foreshadows a timely systematic project that is currently underway.

In 2018, the *Walan Mayiny: Indigenous Leadership in Higher Education* project commenced, aimed at reviewing, comparing and evaluating the roles and practices of Indigenous leaders situated in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States (*Walan Mayiny* translates in Wiradjuri language to mean 'strong people'). In addition to providing an exciting new lens from which to examine the sector, the project specifically aims to examine Indigenous leadership in higher education contexts. In doing so, the project will explore the roles, responsibilities and impacts of senior Indigenous appointments in Australian universities and identify the key advantages and barriers to Indigenous leadership positions in Australian universities, from the perspectives of Indigenous academic staff. Policy documents will also be analysed, to assess synergies between institutional rhetoric and outcomes in relation to Indigenous higher education. In addition, the project will establish a model of best practice for the inclusion of Indigenous leadership in higher education governance structures.

The project will take a qualitative approach to understanding the importance of senior Indigenous leadership in universities. It comprises of two phases: phase one consists of a series of interviews with a range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (including, Indigenous academic staff, senior executive and recruitment officers) and phase two will examine staff employment statistics, Indigenous student retention and attainment, as well as strategic plans and other relevant data. The research findings will be published in subsequent scholarly papers and a report will be disseminated to research participants, universities (including UA) and government, outlining how the best-practice model can be incorporated across the sector.

While the objectives of the project may be considered bold, the authors believe not only is it achievable, but it is also crucial with assisting UA with making 'major strides' in the advancement of Indigenous leadership within higher education, particularly through informing future iterations of the UA Indigenous Strategy. This paper commenced by noting Indigenous education was initially decided by non-Indigenous 'experts' with no regards to the contributions that Indigenous people could make to this space. Our study intends to position itself from quite a different approach where we centre Indigenous people, drawing on their voice, knowledge and expertise to inform a set of stringent findings that will in turn provide the sector, and particularly UA, with detailed knowledge about how Indigenous people can best succeed in higher education when provided with a governance structural system that enables, supports and celebrates Indigenous success and excellence.

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Stacey Kim Coates is a proud Wiradjuri woman, born in Gadigal country and living on Dharawal land. Stacey previously worked in the field of child welfare, before moving into teaching contexts. As a PhD candidate, Stacey is examining synergies between the governance structures within Australian universities and outcomes in relation to Indigenous Higher Education. Stacey completed her Bachelor of Social Science majoring in Psychology in 2008 and her Master of Teaching (Primary) in 2014.

Michelle Trudgett is an Indigenous scholar from the Wiradjuri Nation in New South Wales. Michelle holds the position Pro Vice-Chancellor Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education, Strategy and Consultation at Western Sydney University. Prior to this appointment, she served as the Inaugural Director of the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges at the University of Technology Sydney, and was previously the Head of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University. In 2018, Michelle received the prestigious National NAIDOC Scholar of the Year Award, additionally she was also awarded the Neville Bonner Award for Teaching Excellence (with colleagues Page and Bodkin-Andrews).

Susan Page is an Aboriginal academic whose research focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experience of learning and academic work in higher education and student learning in Indigenous Studies. Her current position is Associate Dean (Indigenous) and Director of the Centre for the Advancement of Indigenous Knowledges, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney. Susan has been an investigator on four Australian Research Council grants and in 2018 led the team which was awarded a national teaching excellence award, the Neville Bonner Award for Indigenous Education.