Aboriginal Nation: A strong Kimberley tertiary education narrative

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Our past shapes our present. However, do Australian universities understand the ways historical discourses continue to shape them? Provoked by the findings of our empirical study implemented in Western Australia's Kimberley region in 2018-2019, we conducted a critical text analysis of recent and past policies to seek historical explanation. As a research team, we noted a demand on behalf of Aboriginal activists to shift from the discourse of "problem" to "nationhood" during the first launch of the Aboriginal flag at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in 1972. However, in our study we observed the "problem" vocabulary lives on, impacting remote Aboriginal tertiary education through its deficit discourse and "gap language". In this paper, we show how the future for remote Aboriginal tertiary education sits within our everyday narratives and explanations. The imperative is to recognise Aboriginal knowledges, strengths, contribution and experience; the alternative is to remain trapped by the deficit discourses of a colonial era. A strengths-based discourse acknowledges that Aboriginal people living in remote communities have the capacity, knowledge and know-how to engage with tertiary education in culturally secure ways. Remote Aboriginal tertiary education could show the way to genuine socio-political transformation in Australia; and the Kimberley could lead this process.

Keywords: tertiary education, red dirt thinking, Aboriginal education, remote, Aboriginal nation

Introduction

The statistical gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians in health, education, employment and economic outcomes is widely publicised (for instance, Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). While across Australia statistics in Aboriginal[1] tertiary outcomes are improving (Universities Australia, 2019), the story for remote Aboriginal communities is different. The research findings discussed in this paper lead to a number of recommendations that echo those of related studies going back 30 years (see, for instance, Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, 1988). This prompted and motivated us to seek a deeper explanation for this enduring lack of change, despite the findings and recommendations of many studies over nearly four decades.

Education is a determinant of social and emotional wellbeing, and of health (Dudgeon et al., 2016). It facilitates employment and active citizenship in community and beyond, and has the capacity to transform people's lives (Guenther, Bat, et al., 2017). Yet, over time, education has colluded with forces producing marginalisation of Aboriginal people and resulting low socioeconomic outcomes (Haebich,

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[1] Use of the words "Aboriginal" and "Indigenous" is interchangeable in this paper in response to Kimberley application (the former) or reference cited. In this paper, we also cite "native problem" in relation to references from Australian history.

2000), as is evidenced by the discourse of "the gap" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). It is likely the impact is more evident in remote areas.

The 1988 *Report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force*, known as the Hughes report, marked a turning point in policy, giving new impetus towards calls for self-determination and equity in Indigenous higher education (Street et al., 2018). It recommended each higher education institution "acknowledge the validity of Aboriginal culture and present Aboriginal communities and cultures in a positive manner in all teaching and research activities" (Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, 1988, p. 40). The report led to the 1989 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989).

Hughes (Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, 1988) stated, "In 1986, 0.6 per cent of the Aboriginal population were studying in universities and colleges of advanced education, compared with a rate for all Australians of around 2.5 per cent" (p. 12). By way of comparison, the latest higher education student data report shows that about 1.3 per cent of the Aboriginal population participate in higher education programs, compared to about 3.0 per cent of the total domestic population (Department of Education and Training, 2019). Participation among remote Aboriginal students is lower still with about 400 students (Pollard, 2018), or 0.3 per cent of total Aboriginal population. The current Australian Government parity target for Aboriginal students is 2.2 per cent (Behrendt et al., 2012).

In this paper, we assert that the lessons of the past still need learning and not much has changed. We suggest that complicity with deficit discourses is at least a partial explanation for this. We explain that, since colonisation, government decision-makers have regarded Aboriginal culture and place-relationship as "the problem", as deficit, and as responsible for the gaps in outcomes. We show that the strength-based decolonising discourse of "Aboriginal nation", which celebrates Aboriginal culture, epistemologies, ontologies, and their importance in sustaining futures for humanity (Williams, 2018), needs to underpin university activities—for the sake of all Australians.

Hughes (Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, 1988) commented on higher education in remote areas:

> The need to successfully introduce new ways to extend these education services to Aboriginal people in smaller communities is emphasised. It must be recognised that many forms of provision which give non-Aboriginal people living in remote areas access to education are not necessarily appropriate for education programs for Aboriginal people. (p. 21)

Conducted 30 years later in 2018, our empirical research noted the persistence of such challenges. This observation prompted us to wonder why so little has changed in the intervening years. Hence, we delve into history as a way of understanding why there is inequity for remote Aboriginal people wanting to engage in tertiary education. Below, we describe the empirical study, the methodology for this present paper, a literature review of remoteness and "red dirt thinking", and a history of "gap" discourse. We follow with a Kimberley history, which illustrates how colonisation continues to this day through the continued use of settler colonial policies, strategies, and practices, whereby "systemic, structural, physical, epistemic and ontological violence continue to oppress, assimilate and eradicate Indigenous peoples" (Paradies, 2020, p. 2).

As a research team, we are an Aboriginal person, who is a Karajarri traditional owner, and three settler-descendants; all have been engaged in remote Aboriginal research and teaching contexts for many years. This research received ethics approval from The University of Notre Dame Australia.

The empirical study

In 2018 a study was conducted entitled Promoting Aboriginal Student Engagement and Success in Tertiary Education, Perspectives from Participants Living and Studying in Remote Locations. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do remote Aboriginal students experience studying at or via a university campus?

2. What are the key enablers and constraints to students' successful participation and engagement with vocational education and training (VET), tertiary and postgraduate study in the Kimberley region?

3. What strategies, identified by Aboriginal students and educators, might assist Aboriginal students living and studying in town-based and remote locations to transition successfully through VET, into tertiary and/or through postgraduate education?

The study was designed to build upon the findings of preceding and related research (Guenther, Bat, et al., 2017; Kinnane et al., 2014; Wilks, Fleeton, & Wilson, 2017). Wilks et al. (2020) reported the general findings and, in this journal, Guenther et al. (2021) reported student outcomes; therefore, we only provide a very brief summary here.

Researchers engaged Kimberley tertiary education teachers and Aboriginal tertiary students from very remote areas who attend a campus[2] for blocks of intensive work, or who remain in their communities for online learning with occasional visits from university teachers, and combinations of the two approaches.

Researchers identified a series of enablers for remote Aboriginal students engaged in tertiary education, together with a list of recommendations to policy makers and educators. These are summarised as follows:

> Strongly represented in both the students' and educators' responses was the expressed need for learning involving culturally embedded experiences, and for teaching practices that do likewise. Respondents offered a number of ways in which Western-framed learning and teaching strategies in remote higher education settings might achieve this. They ranged across elements such as cultural security, community partnerships, Aboriginal knowledges, pathways and transitions, learning in face-to-face contexts, learning in online contexts, and student assessment and support strategies. [These outline] our findings in relation to the complexities of studying remotely. (Wilks et al., 2020, p. 20)

Cultural security emerged as a compelling student priority in the research. As used in the overarching study, it refers to effective practice produced by the application of cultural understandings. In the study, it was defined as follows:

> Cultural security involves meaningful two-way communication, deep listening and yarning, giving proper respect and cultural recognition. It involves the use of appropriate protocols and the highest ethical standards to ensure all elements of the encounter are understood in such a way that all participants benefit fully. (Wilks et al., 2020, p. 27).

It also requires a level of systemic and policy action support (Coffin & Green, 2017). In addressing the study's findings, the application of anti-racist approaches (Paradies, 2017), cultural security (Coffin &

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[2] The student participants were enrolled through one of four tertiary campuses, three of which are dual-system, from various parts of Australia.

Green, 2017), Aboriginal pedagogies (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009), trauma-informed practice (Atkinson & Atkinson, 2017), Aboriginal leadership in university decision-making (Buckskin et al., 2018), Aboriginal student support centres, and information and communication technologies designed for particular communities (Wilks, Wilson, & Kinnane, 2017) were recommended.

Applying these principles, approaches and practices in remote Aboriginal tertiary education allows for learning programs to be collaboratively designed with and implemented through Aboriginal leadership and partnership in preparation for locally designed systemic transformation of university campuses. The data, analysis and interpretation show how these overarching ideas enable tertiary education campuses to be welcoming places for Aboriginal students who feel a sense of belonging. These welcoming campuses enable Aboriginal students to relax, to form multiple identities—student, emerging professional and Aboriginal person—and to engage productively in learning through appropriate teaching for the length of their selected courses (Raciti et al., 2017). Throughout the project, the research reinforced the significance of building effective university-remote community relationships and partnerships, recognising that remote Aboriginal tertiary students belong to and are part of a remote community.

Most of these enablers and recommendations are consistent with the 1989 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989). We are concerned because, since that time, there has been little progress in transformation towards Aboriginal cultural recognition, empowerment, multi-level decision-making and inclusion of Aboriginal knowledges in universities. This is where there is most to gain in terms of real learning improvements for Aboriginal students and in sustainability-related knowledge applications in Australia (Williams et al., 2018).

Methodology

Below, we present a historically informed response to our findings in relation to the second research question relating to key enablers and constraints to students' successful participation and engagement with VET, tertiary and postgraduate study in the Kimberley region. We unpack some of the foundational reasons for the relatively low levels of engagement observed in remote tertiary education participation statistics. We use a critical realism metatheory because it aims to comprehend unobservable mechanisms that explain particular social outcomes, particularly where there are historical or socio-political relations that influence or govern behaviours (Bhaskar et al., 2017).

Within this critical realism perspective, a critical text analysis derives key theoretical concepts, which helped bring this research together. The basis for critical text analysis is that readers can never be certain of an author's bias—intended or unintended. Latour (2004) is concerned with artificially maintained narratives, which do not serve the public good (p. 231), and says, "There is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth … we always speak from a particular standpoint, … while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard won evidence" (p. 227).

Critical text analysis relies upon thorough, critical reading of source materials to determine perspective, locus and assumptions of power, strength of argument, preconceptions and suppositions. Below we provide a short literature review to introduce key frames used in the following critical text analysis.

Context: Remoteness and discourse

In this section, we describe the related notions of remoteness and red dirt thinking as a setting for the section on historically embedded discursive power. The notion of "remote" draws many connotations (including deficit, occasionally) depending upon context and political intention. Guenther et al. (2015) refer to four geographic categories used for understanding education in Australia, which are metropolitan, provincial, remote and very remote. While the categorisation refers to relative distance or isolation, it is sometimes used for multiple purposes, including school-funding decisions, access, service delivery costing, teacher salary ranges and career trajectories, assumptions about Aboriginality, and perhaps assignment of stereotypes such as disadvantaged or advantaged. The term "red dirt thinking" can reverse some of these assumptions, including the fact that "we" in remote Australia are at home in our places while those in the cities are remote from us (Guenther, Disbray, et al., 2017). Red dirt thinking (a) sees learning and educational success defined in the local rather than the national, (b) looks to find ways of building aspiration to achieve that success, and (c) develops strategies accordingly (Osborne & Guenther, 2013).

Red dirt thinking recognises that some of the assumptions behind Western notions of success often comprise simple, unstated solutions. Rather, in remote communities where Aboriginal students live and learn, the use of red dirt thinking would utilise questions about how locals understand success and how the community wishes to address the particular task. Red dirt thinking sits comfortably as a transformative discourse in that it advocates systemic change. It recognises that very remote Australians are quite capable of defining aspirations and strategies for success in all levels of education. We draw on these assumptions in our analysis of history later on.

Concerns to improve Aboriginal statistics (reflecting improved outcomes) in Australia can be traced to the late 1980s and 1990s, when special programs to target Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups were implemented by the Bob Hawke Labor government, which committed to statistical equality by the year 2000 (Altman et al., 2009, p. 226). Altman writes that the intentions of "statistical equality" and "closing the gap" are similar in that they both purport to eliminate socioeconomic disparities. Shortly after the John Howard Liberal government came to power in 1998, a policy framework of "practical reconciliation" aimed to reduce Indigenous disadvantage in the areas of housing, health, education and employment; however, the Howard governments did not specify timeframes for goals, implying the programs provided political rhetoric but were largely symbolic in intent (Altman et al., 2009, p. 226). Gap discourses came to the fore in political rhetoric during Kevin Rudd's prime ministership of the Labor government, with the introduction of a series of policy initiatives under the Closing the Gap title (see Street et al., 2017, for a discussion of this in the context of higher education policy).

Conjecture around the definition and measurement of the gap is not new, but is less familiar in education. For instance, there is regular critique of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) assessment for its role in maintaining deficit discourses by not recognising language differences or measuring Aboriginal strengths and skills of value to remote communities (Gibson, 2018; Guenther, Bat, & Osborne, 2013). Generally, the deficit approach underpinned by "closing the gap" reinforces non-Aboriginal values and notions of success. There is little targeting of gaps to close in favour of Aboriginal ontologies and epistemologies (such as uptake of Aboriginal languages by non-Aboriginal people). Later in our historical investigation, we consider the antecedents of the gap discourse.

A Kimberley history: The power of discourse

Our exploration of history may initially appear unrelated to the empirical study we described earlier. However, as we shall see later in this paper, history both informs our understanding of gap discourse and offers clarity around the repetition of history, as noted in relation to the Hughes report of 1988 and the NATSIEP of 1989. To facilitate the necessary changes referred to in the various reports and inquiries demands a fundamental shift in power relationships, and necessitates a new mainstream worldview and modus operandi (Gerritsen et al., 2019, p. 80). However, in recent times, there have been many claims such as that of Daley (2017) or the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre (KALACC) (2016, p. 1) that "not much has changed". Referring to Sol Bellear, Daley (2017) writes:

> Yet a quarter of a century on [beyond the Mabo decision and the Redfern Speech by Prime Minister Keating], Bellear says his country remains deaf to all the non-government reports into Indigenous lives—and to the savage critiques of Commonwealth policies that purported to make them better. (n.p.)

Directly citing Bellear, Daley (2017) writes, "It's partly racism, it's partly history. To really address what's wrong today, we need to drill into that colonial history and admit all the terrible things that were done to us" (n.p.).

In relation to the seeming illogical intransigence and repetition of history, the Derrida (1994) notion of policies of the past that still prevail is a useful concept—a spectre that is always there which opposes change. Derrida (1994) writes, "This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being … It would harbor within itself … eschatology and teleology themselves" (p. 10).

Lea (2020) adapts notions of policy haunting along with feminist and decolonial theories to "explain the deeply saturated effects of past policies, enduring and shaping conditions in the present, soaking into ambient surroundings (sometimes felt as static) and carried psychically" (p. 30). Use of these notions is to comprehend the extent of colonial injustice. Lea (2020) writes:

> I lift these ideas to understand policy phenomena as likewise being absent presences, scarrings, and potential mechanisms for resistance. To understand policy possibilities, one must come to grips with their invisibilized prior residues. Ghost policies can be hidden in plain sight, structuring everyday worlds, without having a named location or a proper noun identity. (p. 30)

She deploys these ideas to describe a world of policy characterised by short-term political interests and their unpredictable, irrational consequences while the sometimes barely hidden protection of long-term resource extraction issues and the economically advantaged lifestyles this sustains continues. These sit within "contemporary forms of Indigenous dispossession, ineluctably and inevitably" (Lea, 2020, p. 20). Below, we use critical text analysis to reveal places where policies of the past linger in the present and maintain "problem" discourses. We argue that these obscure red dirt thinking, along with narratives of cultural resilience and resurgence, such as the following:

> It doesn't matter how hard you hammer us Blackfellas down you can never hold us down. We always be coming back up just like a rusty nail. We'll always be back. It doesn't matter what white people try to do to us to take our law and culture—we'll be back. We might stay down for a while but we'll be back. (Jacky Green, in Kerins & Green, 2019, p. 177)

Today the Kimberley holds a strong narrative of cultural resurgence and recognition of Aboriginal rights. It reflects 40 years of the Kimberley Land Council with the slogan "getting back country, looking after country and getting control of the future" (Kimberley Land Council, 2019). The Kimberley has seen cultural systems of education, research and learning for millennia, deriving from the Bugarrigarra in the West Kimberley (Dwyer, 2017; Poelina, 2019). There is oral, documentary and landscape-embedded evidence of botanic, ecological, agricultural and geographic knowledges far exceeding that known to modern sciences (Ouzman et al., 2017).

As described by Doring and Nyawarra (2014), there are social histories with living language-embedded cultural explanations dating back millennia, documented in the Gwion art of the Ngarinyin people of the northwest Kimberley. Using the evidence in the rock galleries, knowledge holders narrate an arts-based society of a peaceful, enduring social order under Wunan Law, which retains continuing authority today. Doring and Nyawarra (2014) comment that few societies in the world began with an artist (rather than a warrior). The visual metaphor of a native plum tree records the lifetime education pathway for learning law, from which the mature person must devote his time to educating the next generation (Doring & Nyawarra, 2014). Education has long formed part of a sophisticated Kimberley system of knowledge production and keeping, the significance of which is ongoing (Poelina et al., 2019). Education and many social programs remain positioned between these narratives: cultural strengths and not much has changed.

Kimberley: An (ongoing) colonial history

Against this deep knowledge context and vibrant history, the Kimberley's violent colonial history is one of forced removal, subjugation and intentional expurgation of culture and language for purposes of the coloniser's land usurpation, economic and "civilising" goals (Georgatos, 2013; Jebb, 2002; Pedersen & Phillpot, 2019). As commented by Haebich (2000) in reference to multiple Stolen Generations, "Aboriginal Australians experienced the trauma of loss and separation, as their children were abducted, enslaved, institutionalised and culturally remodelled" (abstract). Resulting from this history, in the Kimberley there remains an increasing intergenerational trauma, compounded by ongoing colonisation as evidenced by domination and forced choices, and lateral violence along with multi-level racism (Dudgeon et al., 2016; Fogliani, 2019). Even so, due to extraordinary resilience, cultural, linguistic, and landscape knowledges remain in individuals, communities, and places (Kinnane & Sullivan, 2015), and Aboriginal knowledges continue to be applied across a range of purposes (for instance, Dwyer, 2017).

Since colonisation, Australian decision-makers have regarded Aboriginal culture as hampering achievement of education, employment and other mainstream economic goals (Dockery, 2017), and this position can be traced to the "protection and uplift" policies developed contemporaneously in England (Aborigines Protection Society, 1837). At the time, British overcrowding and access to lucrative Australian land drew economic investment. Since then, the spread of the Kimberley pastoral industry followed by gold exploration and mining resulted in different forms of cruelty and abuse, murders, removals from country, illness and serious population reduction (de Ishtar, 2005).

The "killing times" is a term used to refer to early colonial days in the Kimberley; it denotes the violent nature of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships in the colonial quest for pastoral land, minerals and control (Georgatos, 2013). Aboriginal massacres and murders have been documented (Pedersen & Phillpot, 2019; Pedersen & Woorunmurra, 1995), as has the use of brutality in the criminal justice system operating in the Kimberly and in the construction of the Canning Stock Route (National Museum of

Australia, 2010). From the 1950s, the intention was to assimilate Aboriginal people as "white" people living in small nuclear families (Haebich, 2000, p. 482), not as people of an Aboriginal nation with Aboriginal values and deep familial connections to land and family.

Our simple introduction to colonial history belies enormous complexity, such as the sometimes deeply caring missionary relationships (Jebb, 2002). However, we offer it to begin to explain how and why Aboriginal elders across Australia still carry language, values and stories, while the Stolen Generations — raised by white institutions with inculcation of "white values" throughout their growing up years — have been so keen to explore their identity, meet their families and come to know their own stories (Wilson, 1997).

This latter statement is of great importance in education today. It draws attention to the significance of acknowledging historical trauma, along with its expression as lateral violence, and the importance of engaging the old people in education and in dealing with Aboriginal youth suicide the "Aboriginal way" (Dudgeon et al., 2016; KALACC, 2016). We assert this history is central to the current dilemma of remote Aboriginal education, including remote Aboriginal tertiary education. University staff members at all levels need to understand it, and use it to inform their practice of cultural security.

Self-determination: From "problem" to "nationhood"

Education sits within society, not apart from it. Here we show that social change in society impacts socio-political, economic and educational institutions alike. In 1967 Sydney University student Charles Perkins led an Australian Freedom Ride; it aimed to "challenge the ingrained discrimination and racism" of New South Wales country towns (Curthoys, 2002, abstract) and contributed to a new awareness in Australia of Aboriginal issues. Along with marginalisation and the prevalence of entrenched structural racism, public awareness of these issues played a key role in the 1967 Referendum when Australians voted overwhelmingly to amend the Constitution to allow the Commonwealth to make laws for Aboriginal people and include them in the census. In 1972 — on Australia Day, and shortly before the new Whitlam Labor government was elected — the extremely influential Aboriginal Tent Embassy was set up on the grounds opposite Parliament House, launching Harold Thomas's Aboriginal flag and demanding a shift in recognition from "native problem" to "Indigenous nation" (Haebich, 2000, p. 571).

Shortly after coming to power the Whitlam Labor government announced their goal was to "restore to the Aboriginal people of Australia their lost power of self-determination in economic, social and political affairs" (Haebich, 2000, p. 571). The intent of self-determination was to apply across the board, including education. Nonetheless throughout this period, there remained a (ghostly) mainstream Australian resistance, which Haebich (2000) describes as "white Australia's continuing failure to understand and respect the human dignity and moral rights of the Aboriginal people" (p. 600).

Within this era of self-determination to attend to economic and cultural differences, there was growing public support for the task of returning Aboriginal children to families and communities. In 1977, for the first time, public attention focused on the relationship between child removal and adult incarceration. This included the fact that, to 1977, nearly 90 per cent of child placements with white families failed (Haebich, 2000, p. 601). Demands to end culturally inappropriate child welfare and education practices resounded across Australia, and this extended to all levels of education. Partly in response, Senator Susan Ryan tabled the report of the National Aboriginal Education Committee in the Australian Parliament in March 1986: "The NAEC has focused especially on: The full recognition and development in education

of Aboriginal cultural heritage; the desirability of ensuring that education is undertaken in harmony with cultural values" (Ryan, 1986, p. 838).

By this time, bilingual education was in place in the Kimberley and Northern Territory (Street et al., 2018). Colleges such as Batchelor, set up for Aboriginal first-language speakers, had graduated cohorts of fully qualified teachers and principals. The University of Notre Dame's Broome campus commenced in 1994, at first for remote Aboriginal teacher education. These initiatives followed 1970s self-determination policies, and were strengthened by access, participation and equity narratives of the 1980s and reconciliation principles beginning in the 1990s (Devlin et al., 2017; Street et al., 2017; University of Notre Dame Australia, 2019). In a glow of celebration and high expectation, in 1990 the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), came into being (*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989*).

The hope of these self-determination initiatives, reflected in government policy of the 1980s and 1990s, was achieving equity or parity and valuing Aboriginal culture and language (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 1995). Targets proposed by Hughes for parity by 2000 (Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, 1988) now seem overly optimistic given that, in 2022, Australia is still far from achieving parity. We can only imagine what could have been if the changes suggested were sustainable beyond the ambitious policy goals of the Hawke–Keating Labor governments. The policy-level red dirt thinking developing in the 1970s and strong in the 1980s to 1990s began to fade in the mid to late 1990s.

ATSIC was short lived, abolished in 2005. A range of opinions propose the real reason ATSIC ended; the following summarises many:

> The end of ATSIC is not really about the suspension of its chairperson and the allegations of misbehaviour which were levelled against him. … The proposal to abolish ATSIC is borne of the fundamental idea that a dissident voice is better silenced. ATSIC consistently and audibly challenged the federal government over a number of major Aboriginal issues. (Falk, 2004, p. 2)

Falk (2004) completed her commentary by saying that Aboriginal freedom was never really an intention for ATSIC; it was just another bureaucracy intending to "whiten and civilise" Aboriginal people (p. 4). With the benefit of hindsight, we see that the Howard government strategically deployed the "problem" discourse in the ATSIC closure (Strakosch, 2015, pp. 104–105).

The Aboriginal self-determination agenda has declined in government parlance over the last 15 years of neoliberalisation (Strakosch, 2015), with governments focusing instead on Indigenous behaviour and intervening in community "dysfunction". Strakosch (2015) argues that neoliberal frameworks rearticulate the settler colonial program, which she illustrates as coercive and authoritarian. Viewed from a historic point of view, it is easy to imagine that collusion via systemic inflexibility is intentional. Perpetuated by epistemological racism, which is constantly using Western framings of knowledge (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016), neoliberalism/settler colonialism reflects a reluctance to relinquish hierarchical power, and accept that a dialogical process can be transformative and liberating for all parties. This position is further supported by Patrick Dodson in the foreword to the report celebrating 25 years since establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, in which he shows how even the notion of reconciliation has been redefined on settler Australia's terms (Reconciliation Australia, 2016, p. 3).

Whilst there is a growing movement for Aboriginal rights and recognition (Indigenous nationhood), there is, at the same time, continuation of a mainstream "problem" discourse. That is, not much has changed. Even though Prime Minister Rudd apologised for the Stolen Generations (Channel Ten, 2008), this matter has never been satisfactorily resolved, and, in 2022, governments are still arguing about where responsibility should lie. To this day, across Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain over-represented in out-of-home care and child protection services (Reconciliation Australia, 2016). Past and present policies and the legacy of colonisation are part of the complex explanation for this situation (Strakosch, 2015). As called for in the 2017 Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, there is a need for a new paradigm in Aboriginal education, research and development (White & Gooda, 2017, p. 5).

Informed by critical realism and critical text analysis, our historical investigation explained the deep artistic, knowledge-based, landscape-embedded richness in Aboriginal education history across the millennia. It traced the historical roots of colonisation through its modern continuity in neoliberalism, with its imposed programs and discourses reflecting the interests of outsiders. Every time a leader, consultant or public servant makes a decision in the supposed interests of Aboriginal people without forming a genuine partnership or heeding Aboriginal voices, the process maintains structures of colonisation. Not much has changed because colonisation and power-over ways of working with Aboriginal people—and speaking about them—continue. This is where the role of regional, rural and remote education is so significant. The transformative Aboriginal rights and recognition agenda depends upon education at all levels, and tertiary education is instrumental to this task.

Conclusion

The research question that prompted this empirical and historical inquiry was "What are the key enablers and constraints to students' successful participation and engagement with VET, tertiary and postgraduate study in the Kimberley region?". We can now include a historical context to enrich the empirical study outcomes. Constraining participation is a deficit discourse in which historic atrocities allow ongoing settler colonialism of Aboriginal Australia to be invisible (ghostly) within the Western body of knowledge. Forms of racism and deficit discourses are used to blame Aboriginal people for such tragedies as high suicide rates and educational under-achievement (see, for example, Windschuttle, 2019). Examples that perpetuate deficit discourses include measurements of education gaps that do not count skills and knowledges of value to remote Aboriginal communities, or privilege Aboriginal languages and cultures, or include Aboriginal definitions of success. This, along with institutional incapacity to recognise cultural strengths, narratives or belief systems, and listen to Aboriginal voices, results in perpetuation of colonial belief systems which mistakenly claim that Aboriginal culture prevents employment or success at school, while it is likely the opposite is true (Dockery, 2017). These are forms of epistemological racism (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016), which are insidious, lurking like an ever-present relic to maintain and reinforce the status quo of settler colonialism.

It seems the repetition of Aboriginal education recommendations, in response to a condition of continuing statistical disparity, connects to a ghostly policy spectre that maintains complicity in the assimilationist agenda of training for subservience (to colonial/assimilationist/neoliberal values) (Haebich, 2000, pp. 275–276). Given the hauntology of policy (Lea, 2020), it is necessary to know history—the good, the bad and the ugly—to fully understand the present. It is imperative to recognise and expunge colonial policy goals that maintain the status quo and reproduce contemporary forms of

Indigenous dispossession, such as resource extraction. To create change is to exorcise this ghost, to face the past, to own it and vow not to repeat it (Lea, 2020).

"Aboriginal nation", on the other hand, is the strength-based decolonising discourse which celebrates Aboriginal culture, epistemologies, and ontologies and their importance in sustaining futures for humanity (Williams, 2018). It asserts the significance of Aboriginal recognition in the constitution, recognises Aboriginal sovereignty was never ceded and insists that the role of settler colonialism be exposed. The difficult dialogue necessary for understanding the socio-political context of Aboriginal education sits between these two discourses. Without this critical perspective, researchers and educators are potentially complicit in maintaining the status quo (Nakata, 2018, p. 3).

Nakata (2018) writes that comprehending Western frames along with perspectives previously rendered invisible, and the inversion of these to Indigenous standpoints with limitations, enables appreciation of the intricate and "interpretable" dance of worldviews, knowledge and practice. Here is the opportunity for change towards genuinely learning-based ways to enhance Aboriginal remote education experiences—through transformative educational environments informed by history, for all learners, including tertiary educators. Perhaps more significantly, as a decolonising research paradigm, it offers opportunities for education institutions and their systems to open to new structures informed by dialogical agency. This is another initiative to support the empirical findings and recommendations reported above.

At the same time, it is becoming widely accepted that an element in planning and implementing sustainable futures is the transformative discourse featuring Aboriginal participation in decision-making and inclusion of Aboriginal epistemologies and ontologies (Yunkaporta, 2019). In other words, there is a call for incorporation of Aboriginal knowledges and ways of working into mainstream society (Dodson, 2010; Santana et al., 2018). As Dodson says, "All Australians should feel, as a nation, connected to the tens of thousands of years of human occupation of the Australian continent and surrounding islands" (Reconciliation Australia, 2016, p. 3). This comment brings together the transformative agenda of Aboriginal nation, which includes land justice, cultural resurgence, self-determination and Aboriginal-led reconciliation. The engagement of tertiary education institutions in this agenda is vital to the Kimberley and to Australia more generally, and we assert this is where remote Aboriginal tertiary education can lead the nation.

As a whole, this study shows that to impact positively upon tertiary education outcomes for Aboriginal students from remote communities and towns, recognition of Aboriginal rights, voices, cultures, histories, knowledge and know-how, socio-emotional wellbeing, leadership and cultural security are central—in universities and in society. Comprehension of the ways in which Western frames of knowledge operate in relation to Aboriginal standpoints, along with their associated worldviews, knowledges, and practices, is significant in teaching and learning. As an Aboriginal-led decolonising paradigm, this package also enables education institutions and their systems to be open to new structures informed by dialogical agency, a learning- and place-based model underpinned by commitment to transformation for sustainable futures. There is potential for leadership of this model by remote Aboriginal tertiary education; and all Australians stand to benefit.

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