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AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY APPROACHES to INDIGENOUS POLICY

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■ Abstract

In this paper, I discuss several key issues – governance, employment, research, culture, anti-racism policies, curriculum, student support and student success – that are critically important in enabling universities to meet the educational needs of Indigenous peoples. I also analyse a representative sample of Australian universities and argue that Australian universities have generally failed to adequately address these key issues. Further, I compare this study to a similar study that I conducted in 2000 and analyse any similarities and differences between the two studies.

■ Introduction

Over the past 20 years, numerous Government reports (DEET, 1993; IEHAC, 2006; MCEETYA, 1995; Yunupingu, 1994) and academic papers (see Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Nakata, 1995; Phillips, 2005; West, 1995) have identified a range of factors that are critically important in enabling universities to appropriately meet the educational needs of Indigenous students, staff and communities. In this paper, I briefly discuss eight of these factors: governance, employment, research, culture and cultural awareness courses, anti-racist policies, curriculum, student access and support and student success, completion, and retention. I also argue that despite these numerous Government reports and academic papers, as well as their own internal documents that emphasise the importance of justice and equity, many Australian universities have not developed policies concerning these factors and have consequently failed to adequately address these key factors. In this paper, I examine the Indigenous policies of universities because although policies alone do not guarantee that universities have adequately addressed these factors, the existence or otherwise of policies are a good indicator of the commitment of universities to address these factors.

■ Methodology

I have selected a stratified sample of 12 universities to analyse the effectiveness of their policies concerning Indigenous issues. The universities have been selected to ensure equitable representation of each State, of both city and regional universities, of Group of Eight (most research-intensive) and non-Group of Eight universities and of those universities with varying numbers of Indigenous students; numbers of students sourced from DEST, 2000, 2005; (2007 data not currently available). This sample is the same sample that I used in previous and similar research on Indigenous policies of Australian universities (Gunstone, 2000) so that I can compare and analyse any similarities or differences between the two studies. Table 1 provides a summary of the criteria of the 12 universities.

In dividing the Indigenous student numbers into three categories, low (under 150 students), medium (150-300 students) and high (over 300 students), an interesting trend emerges. There were five universities with low numbers of Indigenous students in both 2000 and 2005, whereas those universities with

high numbers of Indigenous students substantially increased from none in 2000 to four in 2005.

The major sources chosen for the analysis are the Strategic Plans of the 12 universities. These were chosen as they are the documents that outline the universities' vision, values, operational values and goals. Universities use their Strategic Plans to outline their key priorities, policies and strategies for the next three to five years, such as internationalisation and attracting non-Government revenue. If a particular Indigenous factor mentioned above is not discussed in a Strategic Plan, there can be two interpretations.

The first interpretation is that the university concerned might have a policy discussing that particular factor, but the policy is not considered important enough to be included or even referred to in their primary policy document, their Strategic Plan, but instead might only be mentioned in lower-profile policy documents, such as Equity Plans, Aboriginal Education Strategies or Reconciliation Statements. The second interpretation is that the university does not have a policy at all in regard to that particular factor. In either case, the failure of the university to include that particular factor in the Strategic Plan is a strong indication of the universities lack of commitment to that issue (see Anderson et al., 1998, p. xviii).

■ Critical factors

Governance

One element common to all the factors concerning Indigenous higher education and of essential importance in determining the effectiveness of university policies is the notion of power. Power involves the marginalisation, discrimination and exploitation of certain groups and individuals while also privileging other groups and individuals. To be genuinely effective, university policies need to recognise and address the historical and contemporary disempowerment of Indigenous peoples that has occurred and still occurs in every area of the university. It is vital that issues of power and governance are addressed so that universities more appropriately address Indigenous needs and aspirations (see IHAEC, 2006, p. 25; MCEETYA, 1995, pp. 9-10; Nakata, 1995, pp. 30-31; Whatman & Duncan, 1995, pp. 120-

123). The involvement of Indigenous staff, students, and communities in university governance can significantly improve several broad areas, including access and success rates of Indigenous students, curriculum development, university-Indigenous collaborative research and more broadly, Indigenous self-determination. However, the level of this involvement and engagement in university governance by Indigenous peoples needs to be determined by Indigenous peoples themselves.

None of the 12 universities surveyed in 2000 or 2007 discussed issues of Indigenous governance in their Strategic Plans. Further, no universities in the 2000 or the 2007 surveys discussed the need for Indigenous control over Commonwealth Government Indigenous funds, particularly Operating Grants, in their Strategic Plans. In addition, few universities identified positions for Indigenous people on their major committees. In both 2000 and 2007, no university surveyed identified an Indigenous position for university Council. A couple of universities had an Indigenous person on the Council but they were on the Council through staff elections, rather than on Council through an identified position. Further, while some universities had an Indigenous Advisory Committee, which did have a number of Indigenous members, these committees often had several levels of committees between themselves and the University Councils. Further, only seven universities in 2007 and four universities in 2000 identified an Indigenous position on Academic Board. These identified positions were predominantly for the Director/Manager of the university's Indigenous Centres.

Finally, just four universities in 2007 identified an Indigenous position on their Human Research Ethics Committees (the 2000 study did not look at this area). The absence of guaranteed Indigenous representation on this last committee, which is supposed to ensure ethical university research, illustrates a lack of awareness within many Australian universities of the historical and contemporary exploitation of Indigenous peoples and communities by university researchers. Although a couple of universities in the 2007 survey had an Indigenous sub-committee of the Human Research Ethics Committee or had Indigenous research ethics advisors, these procedures were no substitute for having an Indigenous person on the actual committee that governs research ethics, the Human Research Ethics Committee, notwithstanding that one identified position might not necessarily ensure ethical research.

Employment

The importance of increasing both the numbers and employment roles of Indigenous staff employed at Australian universities has long been recognised (see DEET, 1993, p. 13; IHEAC, 2006, p. 24; West, 1995; Yunupingu, 1994, p. 15). Indigenous employees

Table 1: Criteria of the selected universities.

Location	City – 9	Regional – 3	
State	NSW, VIC, QLD – 3	WA, SA, Tas – 1	
Type	Group of Eight – 3	Non-Group of Eight – 9	
Numbers	Under 150 5 (2000) 5 (2005)	150-300 7 (2000) 3 (2005)	Over 300 0 (2000) 4 (2005)

also need to be supported by their employers (Young, 2004, p. 111). However, most universities have not adequately addressed this factor. Very few Indigenous people are employed by universities, and of those employed, the majority are situated in the Indigenous Centres.

Only one university in 2007 and two universities in 2000 referred to the need to increase Indigenous employment at the university in their Strategic Plans. This lack of commitment from universities to Indigenous employment means there is little awareness of the need for universities to have flexible, alternative, affirmative action employment policies. To genuinely increase the level of self-determination existing within universities, adequate Indigenous employment policies need to be applied throughout the entire university. Further, these employment policies need to be closely linked to other policies discussed in this paper, including research, curriculum and governance.

Research

As with governance, Indigenous peoples need to be able to negotiate with universities over the level of Indigenous engagement with research. This could involve negotiating over research that impacts upon Indigenous peoples, developing support mechanisms for Indigenous researchers, linking research to other issues such as employment and student access and retention and promoting ethical Indigenous research (see Battiste & Henderson, 2000, pp. 141-144; IHEAC, 2006, pp. 18-19; MCYEETA, 1995, pp. 9-10; Smith, 2004, pp. 125-129). Indigenous research could evaluate non-Indigenous research methodologies as well as incorporating Indigenous research methodologies, Indigenous ethical research protocols and Indigenous self-determination (Smith, 2004, p. 4). However, these possibilities of developing new and appropriate research methodologies are not adequately recognised by the majority of universities. University research concerning Indigenous peoples or communities is still often conducted with minimal or no Indigenous consultations, negotiations or governance. None of the universities surveyed in either the 2000 or 2007 samples contained any reference in their Strategic Plans to supporting and developing Indigenous research.

Culture and cultural awareness courses

University staff and students need to develop a greater awareness of the culture of institutional racism and how this can affect universities (see Malin, 1990, p. 327). Universities need to both develop cultural training for its staff and students and provide cultural safety for Indigenous staff, students and community members. The courses are most likely to be effective

when they do not just focus on an appreciation and awareness of other cultures, but they also analyse the dominant culture and the racism and power that exists within the structures and institutions of the dominant culture (Cowlshaw, 2004; Lampert, 2005; Pease, 2004, p. 125; Phillips, 2005, pp. 15-19). These courses could be renamed as anti-racism courses (see Fredericks, 2007). In addition, these courses should be compulsory for all staff and students to ensure that the ignorant and apathetic attend the courses.

However, just four universities of those surveyed in 2007 and none surveyed in 2000, mentioned the importance of recognising and acknowledging these issues. Further, none of these four universities in 2007 recognised the need for universities to develop and support compulsory cultural awareness courses or anti-racism courses.

Anti-racism policies

Another critical issue for universities is to address the significant levels of racism existing within many staff and students by developing and promoting articulate and specific policies that condemn both individual and institutional racism and provide institutional procedures to address complaints of racism. These policies need to be clearly articulated in the Universities Strategic Plans. Moore (1995) argues that anti-racism policies are more effective when: they articulate their own origins; analyse the injustices in terms of oppression rather than disadvantage; characterise the target groups as fighting against oppression rather than suffering; and have goals that focus more on fighting oppression than on issues of access and participation.

None of the surveyed universities either in 2000 or 2007 referred in their Strategic Plans to the need for anti-racism policies. None articulated any specific policies on individual or institutional racism or any strategies designed to combat racism. Further, none of the surveyed Strategic Plans addressed any of the issues raised by Moore. In the few Plans that referred to access, none mentioned oppression.

Curriculum

Curriculum that is embedded with Indigenous knowledge and issues is very limited in Australian educational institutions (MCEETYA, 1995, p. 61). The lack of this embedded curriculum within universities, along with other issues such as governance, employment and research, prevents universities from becoming more relevant to Indigenous staff, students and communities. Instead, Indigenous peoples are often confronted with institutional racism in "commonsense" university curriculum that marginalises or excludes both their cultural knowledge and their academic discipline knowledge. Universities

need to negotiate with Indigenous peoples about the level of Indigenous engagement with curriculum throughout the university. This engagement could mean the implementation of compulsory Indigenous curriculum, implemented through Indigenous governance, in all areas of the university (see Battiste & Henderson, 2000, pp. 92-96; DEET, 1993, p. 14; Lampert, 2005, pp. 94-96; Phillips, 2005, pp. 23-24). Finally, the assessment of this curriculum needs to be negotiated with Indigenous peoples in order to more appropriately address the educational needs of Indigenous students (Christensen & Lilley, 1997, p. xiii).

In both the 2000 and 2007 surveys, only one university discussed in their Strategic Plan the need to develop Indigenous curriculum. The other universities are not recognising the racist practice of excluding Indigenous knowledge and issues from the curriculum. In the area of teacher education courses, no university surveyed mentioned in their Strategic Plan the need to develop, in negotiation with Indigenous peoples, compulsory pre-service education Indigenous studies subjects, despite the long-standing endorsement of this need by all the State/Territory Education Ministers (MCYEETA, 1995, p. 69). The development of these subjects, along with the development of appropriate professional teacher attributes and effective targeting of pre-service education students to work in Indigenous education, are likely to improve the quality of teacher education courses in relation to Indigenous education.

Student access, support, student success, completion, retention

Another vital Indigenous factor for universities is the access and support provided to Indigenous students by the universities (see Bourke, 1996, p. xiv; Craven

et al., 2005, p. 26, 31; IHEAC, 2006, pp. 16-17, 20-21; Yunupingu, 1994, pp. 21-30). The past 20 years has seen the establishment of Indigenous Centres in all Australian universities. These Centres have provided substantial support to Indigenous peoples, both in assisting Indigenous peoples to access university and in providing academic and cultural support services for Indigenous students. However, there is often little support given by the universities to these overworked and under-resourced Centres (Anderson et al., 1998, p. xv). Universities also often see the existence of Indigenous Centres as an excuse to avoid their responsibilities to develop and implement appropriate Indigenous policies.

Only five of the surveyed universities in 2007 and six of the surveyed universities in 2000 mentioned the need to support Indigenous students. Further, the universities largely failed to recognise the importance of addressing success, completion and retention. Just one university in the 2007 survey and two universities in the 2000 survey mentioned this factor in their Strategic Plans. The universities seem more concerned about assisting Indigenous peoples access university (and obtaining the extra funding provided by the Commonwealth Government for further Indigenous enrolments) than improving support for Indigenous students to complete and succeed at university. Finally, no university in 2007 and only one university in 2000 mentioned their Indigenous Centres in their Strategic Plan.

Aboriginal Education Strategy

The Commonwealth Government requires Australian universities to develop and submit an Aboriginal Education Strategy (DETYA, 1999, p. 71). These Aboriginal Education Strategies often discuss many of the factors analysed in this paper. The existence of Aboriginal Education Strategies does not, however, absolve universities of the responsibility of also discussing these factors in their primary policy document, the University Strategic Plan. Further, the Universities surveyed in 2000 and 2007 generally did not even discuss the existence of an Aboriginal Education Strategy in their Strategic Plan. In both the 2000 and 2007 surveys, only one university, out of the sample of 12, referred to their Aboriginal Education Strategy in their Strategic Plan.

Tables 2 and 3 summarise the above eight critical factors.

Table 2: Number of universities that mention factors in Strategic Plans.

Issue	2000	2007
Governance	0	0
Employment	2	1
Research	0	0
Culture and Cultural Awareness courses	0	4
Anti-racism policies	0	0
Curriculum	1	1
Student access and support	6	5
Student success, completion and retention	2	1
Refers to Aboriginal Education Strategy	1	1
No mention of ANY Indigenous issue	5	3

Table 3: Indigenous participation in university governance.

Committee	2000	2007
University Council	0	0
Academic Board	4	7
Human Research Ethics Committee	N/A	4

Conclusion

This paper briefly analysed several key factors – governance, employment, research, culture and cultural awareness courses, anti-racist policies, curriculum, student access and support and student success, completion and retention – that over 20 years of research have identified as being of critical importance in enabling universities to adequately address the educational needs of Indigenous peoples and communities. Through analysing a stratified sample of 12 university Strategic Plans and governance structures, this paper has also examined how university policies and governance structures are failing to address these several key factors. Further, the comparison of the 2000 sample and the 2007 sample reveals that there has only been an improvement in one of these eight factors from 2000 to 2007 (culture/cultural awareness courses), whereas three factors have actually declined over the past seven years (employment, student access and support, student success, completion and retention). Consequently, it is apparent that universities are still largely failing to adequately address the educational needs of Indigenous staff, students and communities.

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