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Section A: Discussion Papers

Becoming Expert in the World of Experts: Factors Affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Participation and Career Path Development in Australian Universities

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Preamble

In the recent history of Australia Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have only had widespread access to a university education for approximately 20 years. Before this, Indigenous graduates from Australian universities were relatively few. Universities were seen as complex, often alien places in Indigenous cultural terms; institutions of European Australian social empowerment and credentialling from which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students were virtually excluded.

For generations of Australians, the lack of Indigenous participation in universities served to reinforce the view that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, along with various other groups in the Antipodean society, did not possess whatever it took to enter the highest levels of public education. In terms of access to cultural capital and opportunity, including high quality pre-tertiary preparations, they were probably right.

During the past 15 years or so, increasing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic and administrative staff have been employed in universities as part of a national strategy to establish substantive, long-term Indigenous participation. In most cases such initiatives have been the direct result of federal and state government funding attached to specific policies, for example the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education policy* (1989) and the *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: Final Report* (1995).

Most of the 37 universities in Australia have been successful in recruiting substantial numbers of Indigenous students and staff, establishing centres, providing support and study facilities, academic programs and often a sound cultural base for interactions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations. However, while the *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: Final Report* (1995) clearly showed that many such developments have been successful in establishing access and participation, there is still some way to go before the gap is closed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous graduation rates.

Equity of outcome is yet to be achieved. For a summary of Indigenous course completion at the university level and comparisons with other Australian students, please refer to the *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres*

Strait Islander People: Statistic Annex (1994: 114). Design and implementation of enabling strategies for Indigenous student participation in higher education have mainly resulted from government and community initiatives and direct action at the campus level. Such actions have also resulted in significant increases in Indigenous staff at universities. For an overview of strategies, facilities and Australia-wide program initiatives, please refer to the *Higher Education Strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students 1992-95: A Summary Report* (1993).

Some of the longer established Indigenous higher education centres have, during the past decade or so, established an important benchmark in mainstream academia. They have sought to consolidate, grow in size and resource strength, appoint senior Indigenous academic and administrative staff, and move well beyond (sole) provision of student support, counselling and study facilities. Many have begun academic programs and established initiatives in teaching and research aimed at laying down foundations for regeneration of Indigenous epistemology, pedagogy, research and curriculum development. Inclusive of the needs and interests of Indigenous students, there is an emerging systemic obligation to address requirements of Indigenous staff.

Development of more substantial Indigenous higher education operations, most in an incredibly short space of time, has not been without intensive struggle, some enduring resistance, and considerable cost. Universities are, at once, the most progressive and conservative of institutions. Some have actively discouraged the influx of Indigenous students to academic programs, particularly in disciplinary areas which have regarded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as inadequately prepared or skilled. Not surprisingly, there has also been some discernible reluctance in areas of university research and teaching which have traditionally focused on the study of Indigenous peoples.

Overall, the preceding situation seems to be changing for the better, but not fast enough for many students and staff. Restoration and re-definition of an Indigenous epistemology in a variety of mainstream academic fields has offered some serious intellectual challenges as well as many exciting opportunities and prospects. Future

university structures and functions are likely to be more inclusive.

Even within generally supportive and more open and equitable frameworks, substantial educational innovation is often most strongly resisted during times of economic and political constraint. Community debate and the results of recent state and federal elections in Australia have demonstrated some degree of diminished community support for continuing rapid social change in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. Immigration policy, multiculturalism and other elements of the pluralistic society have also come under fire by a small but vocal section of the Australian community. There is a sense in which the social change brakes have been applied and a period of review, or perhaps consolidation, has begun. Universities themselves are under attack and there have been substantial cut-backs in spending and investment in some key areas.

In a climate of sustained economic belt-tightening and re-deployment of resources, public investment in university innovation, particularly in radically new or different areas, has come under closer scrutiny. This is especially so in some current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs.

A new age of public accountability and increased quality control has been in the making for some time. It is in this context and within parameters of an intense and demanding long-term struggle, that this paper has been prepared.

Whatever the beginning point of view, it should be recognised unambiguously how far Indigenous Australians and their supporters have travelled in higher education, especially during the past 25 years. In my view it is too early to have applied the brakes or to have expected that staff working in Indigenous centres in universities would have mastered all the complexities of cross-cultural communication and the politics of what was, until a short time ago, an almost exclusively non-Indigenous environment.

Access to, and participation in, one of the country's most powerful, complex and exclusive social institutions, could not have been achieved without the support of a succession of governments, community organisations, numerous individuals and groups, and the universities themselves. To

turn away from the struggle and opportunity now, or to tear down any part of the demonstrably successful structures that have been created, would be a mistake of far-reaching significance.

The remainder of this paper will look briefly at factors affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' opportunities for successful participation in an Indigenous higher education context. It represents one person's point of view, and a non-Indigenous one at that. The paper is nonetheless a result of considerable reflective experience in the field. I submit it in the expectation that it will make some difference, providing a contribution to discussion, dialogue and positive, decisive action.

Indigenous Participation in Academic Careers

There are very many factors which either positively or negatively affect opportunity for Indigenous participation in higher education on the same or similar terms to non-Indigenous staff. At the beginning of the current decade the most widespread and pressing of these were described and analysed by Bourke *et al.* (1991) in their report *Career Development in Aboriginal Higher Education*. One of the key action recommendations of this report was that universities implement urgent workplace reforms for Indigenous staff through their Equity Programs and Strategic Operational Plans throughout the 1990s.

If equity of access, participation and outcome is to be achieved for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics in the long haul, then universities need to listen to, hear and understand what the priorities, issues, interests and goals are for staff already employed. Following on from this fairly straightforward consultation process, what the field needs, in addition, is a more concerted action and evaluation effort.

Although establishment of a successful career in academia is demanding and complex for any teacher, researcher or administrator/manager in universities, especially in the current economic and political climate, it is demonstrably more difficult for Indigenous staff given the following circumstances:

1. The majority of staff recruited are employed at a level of academic qualification which,

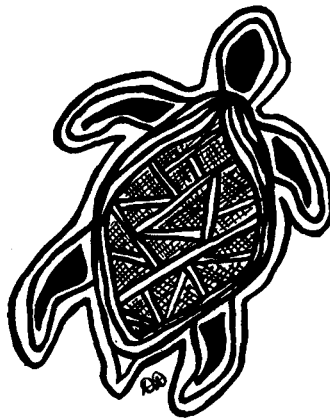
more often than not, requires that they upgrade qualifications whilst learning to survive and succeed in an often complex and culturally unfamiliar environment. Many staff of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Centres are simultaneously students and employees of the university. In this light, consideration of the following circumstances faced by staff should also take into account difficulties experienced by Indigenous students. A cross-section of these has been summarised by Howard (1992: 91-94).

2. All Indigenous academics have to successfully operate in at least two worlds of cultural difference, sometimes more. Many are expected to be bi-cultural and bi-lingual, working in an environment significantly different in terms of values, attitudes and expectations. The language of instruction and dialogue is almost exclusively English. For some Indigenous people working in regional universities English may be their second, third, or fourth language depending on the nature of their background and cultural context. In and of itself, standard academic English as spoken to transact day-to-day business in universities can be difficult to accurately comprehend for staff and students unfamiliar with the discourse.
3. The environment may be supportive and nurturing in a growing number of universities, but it is still harsh and unforgiving in many more. There is an implicit expectation that a few years of sustained access has provided enough time for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to not only 'learn the ropes', but become experts in the world of experts. This reflects an essentially assimilationist attitude, not one which appears to endorse principles of integration, two-way education, self-determination, respect for cultural diversity, or meaningful reconciliation.
4. Although the situation is improving, the majority of Indigenous staff in universities are still employed on relatively short-term contracts, or are employed casually. This tends to mitigate against security of tenure and constructive long-term career path planning. It also sends signals of attitude and value.

5. Although becoming increasingly global and international in focus, the curriculum and pedagogy of university study in Australia is still fundamentally either Eurocentric or North Americanised. In this context both undergraduate and postgraduate study can involve coming to terms with material that is so far removed from the individual's cultural frame of reference and/or community priorities and values, as to be irrelevant.
6. Because Indigenous staff are invariably heavily involved in establishing a political and cultural beach-head in universities, and simultaneously defining their role, responsibilities and purposes in higher education, the tensions that exist between professional development commitments, community, and day-to-day work output can be stress-producing.
7. More often than not, Indigenous staff in universities are expected to be knowledgeable about all things Indigenous, even though recognition of life experience and prior learning is slow to be accepted as accreditation policy. Related to this issue, particularly for Indigenous Australians who have not had an opportunity for on-going education in their own cultural domain, demands for in-depth Indigenous knowledge and experience, across a broad spectrum of subjects and courses, are often unrealistic.
8. Community, family and organisation expectations are usually very high for Indigenous staff working in universities, especially for those who may aspire to better the quality of life for their people through education. If anything is going to give when the level of demand on time, expertise and obligation becomes too great, it is work on an academic qualification or career path consolidation. The incorrect belief, often perpetuated in the community, is that academic qualifications, tenure or promotion, and the myth of substantial financial benefit, are primarily for self. Community and family obligations are strong and constantly demanding.
9. Many of the generation of Indigenous academics who paved the way for successful entry into, and participation in, Australian higher education did not ever have a chance to complete their own academic qualifications. They have been leaders in a field which demanded a constant choice (but no choice at all for most), between consolidating development of Indigenous higher education operations or obtaining personal academic qualifications and promotion. In my view, these are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics who sacrificed their own scholastic career for the future of their people. In acknowledgement of their work, they could be recognised more widely and appropriately by the system which employed them, perhaps through conferral of more honorary postgraduate degrees.
10. Because the vast majority of Indigenous staff in universities have acted as mentors and advisers for Indigenous students and other staff in the university, including non-Indigenous staff, they have had relatively less time than other academics to devote to writing, publication, research, career path planning, and other aspects of professional advancement. Such outcomes have a less than optimal effect on enhancing chances of promotion or tenure in a highly competitive domain.
11. In any area of the university system in which staff are mainly employed on a contractual, part-time or casual basis, there is diminished opportunity to take sabbatical, study or long-service leave. It has not been uncommon in the past to find Indigenous colleagues who have not even been aware that provision exists in universities for such crucially important professional development activity.
12. As a result of circumstances outlined above, demands that are more often than not extraneous to academic activity, Indigenous staff can sometimes take longer than non-Indigenous staff to complete their degrees. While this situation may be exacerbated by a comparative lack of peer mentoring or assistance provided by Indigenous supervisors, the nett result can be that, unless HECs fees are waived or other forms of financial assistance provided, Indigenous staff will pay more for their academic qualifications and career advancement than others.
13. The criteria for promotion and tenure in universities do not accept in general that the research and publication criteria are difficult

to attain by staff who are simultaneously completing higher degrees, adjusting to a complex and culturally diverse work environment, attending to the special demands of breaking new conceptual ground, especially in academic programs, and dealing with the usual extended array of community demands arising from both inside and outside the university.

14. There are relatively few education and training courses, including those offered as on-campus professional development programs, which can appreciate and address the preparation and on-going professional needs of staff in this highly specialised and demanding area of education. Basically it is almost impossible to accurately observe, read, and insightfully understand the field from the outside.
15. It is regrettable that in the late 1990s Indigenous programs in universities are still seen by many as primarily or exclusively student support and study centres. Universities in general in Australia have failed or refused to recognise the substantial opportunities that are emerging through the development of innovative academic programs, community partnerships and collaborative research.



Summary

Demands on Indigenous staff in universities are multifarious and often conflicting. They are nonetheless grist for the mill of development. The system, by and large, fails to understand the nature of work in Indigenous higher education. It does not have time or other resources to examine itself. Possibly it is also a question of inclination. People, ideas, resources, and commitment make the difference, not necessarily more reviews.

Although interest and action by various academic and general staff unions around the country have produced substantial gains and higher levels of awareness and inclusion of Indigenous academics in negotiating and bargaining procedures, the reality still is that working conditions are variable from university to university. Indigenous

academics themselves may need to take a more active interest in industrial matters if this is seen as an appropriate way to go.

Additional demands on Indigenous staff emanate from Indigenous communities, organisations, and from the university environment itself. In any situation it is difficult for academic and administrative staff to separate out and balance personal, family, community and professional business. It may be difficult and culturally inappropriate for Indigenous staff in universities to even try to do this. The milieu is usually multifaceted, holistic, and non-negotiable in respect of certain protocols and priorities. Demands on time, energy, commitment and other resources from a wide variety of perspectives are nonetheless ever-present and, in some circumstances, destructively unrealistic.

The preceding list of circumstances affecting Indigenous employment and career path opportunity in higher education is not exhaustive. It has been put together cumulatively over a number of years and in close consultation with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues. It would be useful, I expect, to add to this what others in the university sector or communities and organisations think and feel about what is at issue. I would welcome correspondence and further information or comment. Ultimately, the higher education sector itself needs to accept more

responsibility for taking decisive action and closely monitoring and evaluating outcomes. A central problem is that many Indigenous centres are physically and operationally isolated from the mainstream, even marginalised, and not enough senior managers in universities have had enough direct experience to be cognisant of either the problems or the outstanding opportunities and benefits.

In this light I trust that the issues and opportunities raised will provide points for debate and further refinement of whatever strategy is advanced for continuing to bring these and related matters to the attention of those who exert influence over the work and career paths of Indigenous staff.

Related to the above, there is also the matter of non-Indigenous people working in Indigenous higher education. If they are competent and committed to working in the field, what are their roles and responsibilities and futures in terms of productive work experience and career paths in higher education? Are such people needed and necessary, or should Indigenous Australian academic and administrative staff in universities be expected to build two-way education substantially on their own?

While it is understandable that the foregoing questions and issues would not be top priority in the current social climate, I would like to suggest that they be seriously considered, especially in those universities which are at the forefront of Indigenous education. Some universities in each state and territory have signed up for and implemented Indigenous Employment Strategies. While these generally seem to be very positive programs, they nonetheless still have to deal with the generic working conditions and demands on staff referred to in this paper.

Throughout this paper I have tried to allude to career path planning and employment opportunities for technical, general and administrative staff as well as academics, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, working in Indigenous higher education programs. Needs and interests of non-academic staff of universities can be overlooked as part of what may be a systemic unwillingness or inability to see the situation holistically. If people, ideas, commitment and resources do make the difference then, ideally, we need every good person we can find to make a worthwhile, valued and strategically significant contribution.

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