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Indigenous Higher Education – creating pathways to PhD study for Indigenous Australians

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Despite improvements in health, education and income, Indigenous Australians still lag behind their non-Indigenous counterparts on a number of key indicators including participation in Higher Education. The Indigenous employment rate was 47.5% compared to 72.1% in the total Australian population and there is a gap of 28% between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous 20-24 year olds who had achieved year 12 or equivalent of schooling in 2012-2013 [1]. Closing the gap in higher education is key to achieving social and economic development in Indigenous communities. By addressing Indigenous education outcomes, from primary school to PhD level, we hope we can work towards closing these gaps as well as the health gap, a gap that sees Indigenous Australians living more than 10 years less than non-Indigenous Australians.

While Indigenous enrolment numbers have been steadily improving across Australian universities, they still lag behind. There were 13,700 Indigenous students enrolled in higher education in Australia in 2013, a growth of 52% since 2003 though Indigenous students as a proportion of the higher education cohort has remained relatively unchanged from 2003-2013 [2]. Australian Indigenous students tend to favour three fields of study: society and culture, health, and education [2]. Growth in Indigenous participation is apparent in undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs but Indigenous participation in higher degree by research (HDR) is an area that needs significant attention.

Currently only 1.4% of HDR enrolments and only 0.55% of HDR completions in Australian universities are Indigenous students [3]. The rate of growth for overall doctoral candidate numbers is outpacing the growth for Indigenous candidates, so the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous research candidates is also widening rather than closing [3]. What is more concerning is the widening gap between commencements and completions for Indigenous doctoral students [3].

Until now, Higher Education strategy for Indigenous students has focussed on the development of pathways from high school to undergraduate degrees. This has included providing academic and cultural support to facilitate study



to completion. However, the number of Indigenous Australians undertaking higher degree by research training is now growing. Increasingly, it is seen as an emerging policy priority as a mechanism for creating a university environment to support, amongst other things, strategies to grow the number of Indigenous students in higher education.

Growing the Australian Indigenous PhD cohort is a key to growing the number of Indigenous academics in Australian Universities. Indigenous academics can serve as role models and provide leadership (as supervisors and teachers) to Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alike. Indigenous academics also bring a unique research capacity and agenda to universities. This Indigenous-based research capacity will provide a unique contribution to work with governments and other organisations in tackling issues facing some parts of Indigenous Australia, from high rates of youth suicide to unemployment and family violence [4]. Increasing the presence of Indigenous peoples, knowledge and cultures at universities makes campus life richer and more relevant. Higher education is also important to the cultural futures and sustainable economies of Indigenous communities themselves [5].

A review by the Australian Council of Learned Academies on Australia's Research Training System suggests that diversifying the higher degree by research cohort "will produce a more equitable system, provide a greater scope for new knowledge, improve cohort experience, strengthen the research system, and will help advance Australia towards an innovative and prosperous future" [3]. This diversification effort should prioritise Indigenous Australians.

Barriers to Participation of Indigenous Australians in Higher Degree by Research Studies

The pipeline

Indigenous Australians experience disadvantage on a number of indicators including health, poverty and education. Indigenous educational disadvantage starts well before higher education [6]. PISA (Programme for international Student Assessment) results show significant gaps in outcomes across reading, mathematics and science literacy in mid-secondary schools for Indigenous students [2]. Only "a small percentage of Indigenous students graduating from high school are actually eligible for university based on their test results" and there is a lack of awareness of further study options for those Indigenous students who would be eligible [6]. It is impossible to imagine high levels of Indigenous PhD enrolment and completion without addressing the other kinks earlier in the pipeline.



Financial

Scholarship funding for PhD studies is limited and competitive in Australia. The typical Indigenous postgraduate student is mature, female, and has family obligations. Many Indigenous doctoral students live remotely and must relocate to study. This means that most Indigenous students are unable to embark on a higher degree by research without a scholarship [4]. This is not necessarily the case for non-Indigenous PhD students.

University support and academic readiness

Indigenous students who do manage to overcome financial and educational barriers to begin doctoral research are then faced with a new set of barriers including a lack of preparedness for research and poor research supervision [4]. Supervisors are often ill-equipped to work with Indigenous Australian research degree students – lacking either the time, training or cultural knowledge to help their students complete their doctorates [6].

The low numbers of Indigenous staff and support members and the lack of Indigenous participation in Australian university governance and management does not foster a solid educational environment for Indigenous research students [6]. While there is university support and efforts to bring students into research studies, that support drops off throughout the degree failing to help students get to completion [6]. While family support is key to Indigenous student success, those students without those support structures need an alternative support network to bolster their success – that is one universities must provide [6].

Social and cultural isolation

The lack of other Indigenous research students on campus and the often significant distances students must travel to complete their studies leads to a feeling of social isolation for Australian Indigenous doctoral students [4]. Students can also feel a degree of cultural alienation due to the clash of socio-cultural values in both research content, campus climate and the mainstream academic environment [6]. Indigenous people, knowledge and culture are not visible nor well integrated on Australian university campuses and Indigenous studies are not well respected and recognized [6]. Indigenous students have also experienced racism on campus as well as the host of mental health problems that are associated with exposure to discrimination [6].



Solutions

Campus climate

Australia has a National Indigenous Research Knowledge Network as well as institutes and research centres across the country that work to build the capacity and reduce the isolation of Indigenous researchers [3]. The 2012 review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People recommended that universities “continue to support Indigenous Education Units to provide a culturally safe environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students” [7].

Indigenous knowledge and cultures need to be more visible on campus, this can be achieved through a number of initiatives including: having Indigenous staff in more powerful positions, introducing cultural competency training programs and short courses, utilizing Indigenous people and knowledge in the university’s vocabulary and imagery, explicitly incorporating Indigenous values into university publications/positions and using university power to advocate for Indigenous peoples, knowledge and cultures [6]. Indigenous peoples’ “identities, strengths and agency” must be recognized and respected [3].

Policy and priority

Higher education must be a strategic priority for the Indigenous policy agenda. Universities need to set targets for increasing Indigenous PhD numbers and monitor those targets. Recommendations to boost Indigenous student, staff and research numbers and performance from the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People include a suggestion for the Australian Government to work closely with universities to set targets, develop strategies to reach these targets and reward universities that demonstrate improvements [7].

Support

Research training that targets Indigenous postgraduate students as well as training for supervisors will enable students to feel more equipped to navigate the challenges of a research degree. This training, combined with more flexible co-supervision arrangements for Indigenous higher degree by research students, is advisable [7]. Indigenous support centres are important to fostering a more inclusive and integrated university experience for Indigenous students and universities must create spaces for Indigenous higher degree students to meet across disciplines and share knowledge to overcome social isolation and research experience gaps [4].



In New Zealand, Maori doctoral research students have higher completion rates due to high investment in the development of collaborative programs between universities and students [4]. At the University of Melbourne, the Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Research and Leadership aims to equip both non-Indigenous researchers/supervisors and Indigenous PhD students with research training [4]. The Review of Australia's Research Training System suggests that making training in Indigenous research methodologies a mandatory requirement for all research students would ameliorate the isolation of Indigenous candidates [3].

Funding

Scholarships need to target and prioritize Indigenous students. Scholarships at Australian universities are for the most part determined by academic merit but determination by merit alone ignores the structural inequalities experienced by Indigenous Australians from higher rates of poverty to infant mortality. Funding needs to extend beyond completion, as per New Zealand's Māori and Indigenous Doctoral Program [5]. Australian funding systems need to be reviewed. As current scholarships do not cover living expenses for Indigenous candidates, the Review of Australia's Research Training System supports expanding income support for these students [3]. Providing longer term scholarships that include academic positions, as well as weighting Indigenous completions with a higher value, would also provide incentives for Indigenous students and institutions alike. Both research training and financial support should be tailored to the individual needs and the often unique living situations and obligations of Indigenous students [5].

Communication/building the pipeline

The benefits of HDR need to be better communicated to Indigenous undergraduates and communities (especially to ameliorate the financial burden involved). High-achieving Indigenous students need to be identified, nurtured and mentored from an early age [3]. Indigenous academics can play a key role as role models and promoters of research careers to Indigenous Australians. Schools and universities must work together to develop the pipeline to all post-secondary education from undergraduate to PhD level. Transition programs are key to this pipeline and are therefore a funding and policy priority [6].



Conclusion

Universities need to adapt to accommodate Indigenous doctoral students rather than expecting Indigenous students to set aside their unique experience, knowledge and burdens to pursue HDR. Universities must endeavor to become locations that Indigenous students feel connected to and respected in. This will involve both elevating Indigenous knowledge and culture on campus and training supervisors and students. A degree of flexibility is required to meet the needs and grow the pool of Indigenous students. This flexibility extends from pathways and entry into postgraduate research and includes a more malleable approach to funding and support. PhD study is the pinnacle of formal education and Australian universities must seize the opportunity to mobilize to enable more Indigenous students to embark on the pathway to PhD.

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