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Editors

Indigenous Pathways, Transitions and Participation in Higher Education

From Policy to Practice

 Springer Open

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Preface

Key national and international stakeholders involved in the delivery, coordination and leadership of programs associated with Indigenous pathways and transitions into higher education were invited to contribute the chapters that comprise this book. The book has a pragmatic focus drawing on evidence based on real-world experiences, and the contributions reflect the different approaches and strategies currently being adopted. Several of the contributions are from participants who attended the 2015 National Indigenous Pathways and Transitions into Higher Education Forum hosted by Charles Darwin University. The primary evidence base used throughout the book relates to lessons learned and outcomes achieved in Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programs (HEPPP). The editors consider this publication a great way to celebrate the contribution and importance of HEPPP.

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Chapter 2

Understanding the Nexus Between Equity and Indigenous Higher Education Policy Agendas in Australia

James A. Smith, Sue Trinidad, and Steve Larkin

Introduction

Education is often considered a lifelong journey that starts in early childhood and involves participation in primary and secondary schooling, followed by potential participation in vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (SCRGSP 2014). Participation along this education trajectory is a key contributing factor in economic participation and labour market success in Australia (SCRGSP 2014). Unfortunately, not all people get the same opportunity to access and participate in lifelong education, which impacts upon their ability to secure and maintain well paid and fulfilling employment opportunities over the longer term. There can be various barriers and challenges that get in the way. Many of these relate to unfair and socially unjust experiences of marginalisation or disadvantage. These challenges result in many sub-populations being under-represented or achieving sub-optimal outcomes when participating in Australia's education system (James et al. 2008; Cardak and Ryan 2009; Edwards and McMillan 2015). In Australia, we often refer to these sub-populations as 'equity groups.' Indigenous people are considered, within a national policy context, to be one such 'equity group.' This chapter aims to

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provide a more nuanced understanding of the synergies and discordance between equity and Indigenous higher education policy agendas in Australia.

Understanding the National Equity in Higher Education Policy Agenda

Policy concerns about addressing equity in higher education in Australia have been debated and refined for nearly four decades (Rizvi and Lingard 2011; Pitman 2015). A White Paper on higher education was released by the Minister for Education in 1988, which first raised the need to promote greater equity in higher education (Dawkins 1988). A subsequent discussion paper was released in 1990 entitled *A Fair Chance for All* (James et al. 2004). This document was instrumental in setting the agenda for the development of a national equity policy framework and respective equity indicators (James et al. 2004). In 1994, four national equity indicators often referred to as the ‘Martin Indicators’ were developed in relation to access, participation, success and retention in higher education (Martin 1994). This was closely followed by a report on *Equality, Diversity and Excellence: Advancing the National Higher Education Equity Framework* with a series of equity-focused recommendations released in 1996 (NBEET 1996). A discussion paper entitled *Higher Education at the Cross Roads* was released in 2002 and reiterated that students from disadvantaged backgrounds remained under-represented in Australian universities (Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training 2002). In 2003, a package of policy reforms developed in the form of *Our Universities: Backing Australia’s Future* was released (Nelson 2003). This included equity-related funding streams and programs, such as the Indigenous Support Fund, equity scholarships, and the establishment of the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council. These policy investments ultimately led to Australia being perceived as a strong global leader in addressing equity in higher education (James et al. 2004; Coates and Krause 2005).

A notable feature of Australia’s policy discourse was the identification of six designated equity groups (Martin 1994; Pitman and Koshy 2014). These include:

- Low socio-economic status (LSES) students
- Students with a disability
- Indigenous students
- Students from regional and remote areas
- Women in non-traditional areas of study
- Students from non-English-speaking backgrounds

These equity groups have remained stable for the past 25 years and have more recently been included, again, within the drafting of the *Framework for Measuring Equity Performance in Australian Higher Education* (Pitman and Koshy 2014).

Interestingly, in more recent times, a *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley et al. 2008) has continued to reiterate the importance of increasing the number of under-represented groups within Australia's higher education system – including Indigenous people, people with low socio-economic status, and those from regional and remote areas. The Bradley Review reinforced the notable lack of participation and achievement among equity groups in higher education in Australia when compared to the general population, despite significant policy in-roads (Edwards and McMillan 2015; Pitman 2015). The panel argued that the participation of equity groups in higher education warranted an even greater focus in future higher education strategy and policy development (Bradley et al. 2008). This call to action acted as a catalyst for the Australian Government to reinvigorate its policy commitment to equity in higher education, particularly in relation to providing enhanced pathways and transitions into higher education for equity groups (Pitman 2015). Recent investments have included:

- Program funding to build the aspiration, expectation and capacity of equity groups to participate in higher education
- Funding of various research projects to build an evidence-base about interventions most likely to work in promoting successful participation of equity groups in higher education
- Ongoing support to sustain the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education
- Commissioning of a Framework for Measuring Equity Performance in Australian Higher Education
- The emergence of Equity Practitioners as a legitimate role to work within the Australian higher education system to support students from various equity groups to thrive at university.

Naturally these investments have provided a more supportive environment for Australian universities to develop and implement programs aimed at increasing participation among equity groups. As a direct result, small incremental successes in enrolments have been noted among low SES (LSES) students across Australia over the last few years (Pitman 2015).

While increased supports for equity groups are both necessary and highly valued, it is becoming increasingly evident that targeted programs and activities which are tailored to the needs of each separate equity group are also required. Arguably the most disadvantaged equity group is that of Indigenous students. Evidence suggests that members of this particular equity group may also belong to other equity group categories. For example, a remote Indigenous student from a LSES background clearly falls into some equity groups. Historically, funding for Indigenous higher education programs has been provided separately to that of other equity groups (Coates and Krause 2005). We discuss these investments in more detail shortly. That is, Indigenous participation in higher education has been epistemologically constructed as both part of, and separate to, a broader equity in higher education policy agenda. The following section examines the unique policy setting relating to Indigenous participation in higher education in Australia. We then use

this information to unpack the synergies, difference and possibilities between these two higher education policy contexts.

Understanding the National Indigenous Higher Education Policy Agenda

Higher education has a critical role to play in improving the socio-economic position of Indigenous people, their families and their communities (MCEETYA 2001; Behrendt et al. 2012). However, pathways into higher education are often complex to navigate, and the systemic and practical challenges and restraints faced by Indigenous learners can ultimately hinder their participation in higher education (Thomas et al. 2014). The Productivity Commission consider that a successful transition from school can be defined as the proportion of young people aged 17–24 years who are participating in post-school education or training or employed (SCRGSP 2014). Yet, we already have data that shows that for more than a decade Indigenous students have been more likely to enter higher education as older or mature age students in contrast to direct entry from school (MCEETYA 2001; Behrendt et al. 2012). This adds a further layer of complexity when developing strategies aimed at attracting Indigenous students to, and supporting and retaining their participation in, university. Therefore, unless we see significant improvements in primary and post-primary education outcomes for Indigenous people in Australia, alongside strategy development that recognises unique pathways for Indigenous adult learners, we argue Indigenous students are likely to remain significantly under-represented in the higher education system. In turn, this perpetuates the higher levels of social and economic disadvantage they too often experience (Thomas et al. 2014). As Andersen and others (Andersen et al. 2008, p. 2) aptly explain,

For Indigenous students, participating in higher education is not simply a matter of deciding ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to university. While enrolment occurs at the individual level such choices are socially patterned. Our students who make it through to enrolment choices are the survivors of a long process of attrition that begins even before formal schooling. Research in this area, while usually only including Indigenous students as one of the clusters of ‘equity groups’.... stresses the overwhelming role of social, economic, political and cultural factors in shaping and facilitating the choices for students and their families.

Given the above information, it is not surprising, albeit concerning, that within higher education settings Indigenous students have high attrition rates, low retention and completion rates, and a high failure rate (Devlin 2009; Behrendt et al. 2012; Bandias et al. 2013). This is indicative of the challenges Indigenous learners face before and upon entering the higher education system. It also demonstrates that a focus on pathways alone, without consideration of the support structures and systems that underpin those pathways, can be problematic. In the words of Devlin (2009, p. 1), ‘Australia has failed Indigenous people in relation to higher education equity, and we must understand why, in order to do better.’

This is an important point of reflection, as throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a steady increase in Indigenous specific programs in higher education in Australia (Trudgett 2010; Pechenkina and Anderson 2011). This included the establishment of Indigenous Support Units, which have now been firmly embedded into nearly all higher education institutions across Australia (Pechenkina and Anderson 2011). While there is contention between how many programs emerged and within exactly what timeframes (Trudgett 2010), it is generally agreed that there has been significant growth in Indigenous programs and support units and that this, by and large, has supported Indigenous participation in higher education. Also, there was considerable investment in the sector in 2003, which saw the establishment of the Indigenous Support Fund and the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council. Unfortunately, a recent decision of the current Australian Government to abolish the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council is regrettable (Cormann 2015) and represents a significant step backwards for Indigenous higher education leadership and Indigenous higher education policy development in Australia.

With the growth in Indigenous Support Units, there was a parallel investment in the establishment and delivery of Indigenous specific enabling programs and initiatives to support Indigenous students to transition into higher education, particularly during their first year of study. These enabling and support programs span aspiration-building, such as pre-entry ‘taster’ days and camps; the provision of free or heavily subsidised accommodation and travel, including the national *Away From Base* program; literacy and numeracy assistance; Indigenous academic preparation and bridging programs; Indigenous mentoring and tutoring; Indigenous/equity scholarships; and specific Indigenous learning and study spaces, among others (MCEETYA 2001; Andersen et al. 2008; Devlin 2009; Behrendt et al. 2012; Thomas et al. 2014). They have played an important role in ensuring Indigenous students feel supported when entering university and have ultimately promoted equity in access and outcomes. In particular, they have provided a more culturally safe environment for Indigenous students to undertake study (Bandias et al. 2013). While the establishment of Indigenous Support Units and respective program implementation has been a welcome investment over the past couple of decades, there are risks associated with these supports being perceived as a panacea for Indigenous students (Page and Asmar 2008). That is, there may be other supports across universities that sit outside of Indigenous specific units, which are well resourced and not being fully utilised. There may also be more significant and active roles that university faculties and schools can play in integrating more structured supports for equity groups (including Indigenous students) within their specific learning and teaching settings.

At this juncture, it is useful to acknowledge that the Australian Government initiated the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders* in April 2011 (Behrendt et al. 2012). This is commonly referred to as the Behrendt Review (Behrendt et al. 2012), and the panel released its final report in July 2012. This report provided a range of recommendations to improve access, participation and achievement in Indigenous higher education in Australia. Recommendations related to:

- Achieving parity for Indigenous students and staff in the higher education sector
- Unlocking capacity and empowering choices through school, enabling programs, access to information and other pathways
- Focusing on Indigenous success including the provision of support through Indigenous Education Units and faculties, and building professional pathways and responding to community need
- Provision of Indigenous specific support to universities and students including Indigenous tutorial assistance; support for ATSI (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) students from regional and remote areas; and financial support to ATSI students
- Valuing ATSI knowledge and research by acknowledging ATSI knowledge and perspectives; investing in higher degrees by research and research training and building ATSI research capability
- Supporting ATSI staff
- Enhancing university culture and governance
- Developing an ATSI higher education strategy and a monitoring and evaluation framework

Our intent is not to revisit the in-depth detail already provided in the Behrendt Review. However, an important finding of the Behrendt Review relates to the need for systemic change in university culture, governance and leadership practices. It is argued that distributed responsibility for Indigenous higher education outcomes across all faculties and among all senior management positions within Australian universities is needed (Behrendt et al. 2012). That is, while Indigenous Support Units have played a pivotal role in the incremental development of Indigenous higher education, a range of other systemic issues also needed to be addressed. Similarly, the way in which we monitor and evaluate the facilitators of, and barriers to, Indigenous students accessing, participating and achieving in higher education is critical. It is pleasing to know that the draft framework for measuring equity performance in Australian higher education has incorporated a range of Indigenous indicators (Pitman and Koshy 2015).

Understanding the Synergies and Discordance Between National Equity, and Indigenous, Higher Education Policy Agendas

There are some reasons why the nexus between national equity, and Indigenous, higher education policy agendas is important. In our experience, this nexus can be both synergistic and discordant. We argue that a better understanding of the synergies can provide scope for progress. Conversely, a better understanding of the discordance can help in alleviating the tensions that may hinder progress among and between various equity groups. We discuss these issues in more detail below.

Synergies

We have identified three common threads central to the nexus between equity and Indigenous higher education policy contexts in Australia. These relate to (1) the values on which the policies have been developed; (2) the nature of the issues being identified and addressed within equity and Indigenous high education policy frameworks and reviews; and (3) the continually emerging and compelling evidence-base about what does and does not work to inform revisions of the policies and to guide future program investments. We discuss each below.

Values

It is well established that equity policy is underpinned by principles of social justice, fairness and inclusiveness (Rizvi and Lingard 2011; Pitman 2015). Similarly, these principles are embedded metaphorically, not necessarily explicitly, in most contemporary Indigenous policy discourses focused on ‘closing the gap’ or ‘overcoming disadvantage’ (COAG 2009; SCRGSP 2014). That is, the principles underpinning the policy discourses are closely related – there is an axiological harmony. However, this does not mean the policy discourses themselves are closely related. As Rizvi and Lingard (2011, p. 9) assert:

Policy-making is a fundamentally political process, involving an assemblage of values with other considerations, through various political calculations. In education, policy processes have to juggle a range of values, such as equality, excellence, accountability and efficiency, often simultaneously, against a calculation of the conditions of possibility. This means that policy-makers have to assemble, organise and order values, configuring them in such a way as to render them more or less consistent and implementable. This requires privileging some values ahead of others.

In the case of the nexus between equity and Indigenous higher education policy agendas, re-asserting the values base could be beneficial. This could assist the (re)shaping of the political contexts in which policy decisions are made. This is particularly important in relation to the Indigenous education policy landscape, including the higher education policy arena, which has been subsumed in a broader Indigenous affairs policy discourse. As has previously been noted, Indigenous affairs policy in Australia is in a period of upheaval (Russell 2014). The conflation of more than 150 programs into five mega thematic areas as part of the Australian Government Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) is one such example. As a result of the implementation of IAS, there has been a notable decrease in Indigenous affairs funding across Australia. Funding for the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) has been ring-fenced to some extent, but is now being channelled through the IAS implementation process via the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, in contrast to being delivered through the Commonwealth Department of Education. A more nuanced and explicit values-based discussion, consistent with a broader equity higher education agenda, could potentially alter the way in which Indigenous

higher education is currently positioned within the federal policy landscape. We acknowledge this has both its strengths and weaknesses. However, aligning policy discourses through a values-based dialogue can reinforce a sense of unity among equity groups. In turn, this may create (or further build) a critical mass that is currently divided between two different policy discourses. This has potential to enhance collaborative efforts through program implementation involving equity groups, including Indigenous students, within and between Australian universities.

Nature of Equity Issues

Given that the values base of equity and Indigenous higher education policy agendas are closely aligned, it stands to reason that the nature of equity issues addressed through policy and program responses could be similar. The alignment of recommendations in the Bradley Review (Bradley et al. 2008) and Behrendt Review (Behrendt et al. 2012) illustrate this point well. That is the fundamental issues affecting all equity groups relate to access, participation, success/achievement, retention and completion. This provides a unique opportunity to better align equity and Indigenous higher education policy discourses, and subsequent program and systemic investments, at institutional, regional, state, national and global levels. While there may be additional issues for some equity groups or different approaches and strategies to address common issues between equity groups, there are also opportunities to work collaboratively. Working in partnership assists us to unpack overlaps and to find common ground with a collective purpose. We argue the way in which universities have spatially, organisationally and structurally separated or siloed equity and Indigenous higher education policy agendas, and respective support programs and infrastructure, acts as a barrier for enabling greater cohesion, integration and interdependence between equity groups. It has also created an artificial hierarchy between some equity groups and competition for limited resourcing. This is unproductive for pursuing collaborative arrangements, where and whenever possible. The adoption of a strengths-based approach, which focuses on better aligning and cross-pollinating evidence-informed equity and Indigenous agendas in higher education, is needed. However, we equally acknowledge the potential risks and associated counter-arguments of diluting critically important Indigenous equity-focused programs in higher education. There is clearly a need for both.

Evidence

There has been an unprecedented growth in research focused on student equity in higher education. A useful example is the 2014 and 2015 grant funding rounds coordinated by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE). Evidence generated through these research projects is disseminated in real time

through an extensive network of equity-focused researchers, practitioners and policy-makers across Australia. There is also a range of large cohort and longitudinal studies underway in Australia, which assists us to explore and better understand the needs and aspirations of various equity groups. Such studies are listed in (Table 2.1).

Similarly, there are a range of Indigenous higher education research initiatives across Australia funded through a range of sources such as the various nodes of the National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network. This is supported by Indigenous leadership through the National Indigenous Higher Education Consortium. Evidence dissemination is a feature of regular conferences and forums of these networks and consortia.

There are also a number of well-resourced equity and Indigenous higher education programs that have received competitive and ongoing funding through the Federal Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). Many of these programs have been evaluated. While the Australian Government has not conducted a meta-evaluation of the process, impact and outcomes of the HEPPP, there is certainly a solid evidence-base arising from individually funded projects which can guide future policy and program development in this space. The NCSEHE publications provide overall evidence of 70 case studies used throughout the 37 public universities (NCSEHE 2013, 2014). In particular, this evidence can assist in building, sustaining and scaling-up successful equity and Indigenous programs across Australia. Indeed, previous authors have explicitly advocated for culturally respectful and evidence-based evaluation of existing programs that have been designed to address Indigenous equity in education (Devlin 2009). Devlin (2009, p. 4) convincingly argues:

What is needed is a systematic, independently validated evaluation of these [equity initiatives] individually and as a whole. Without such evaluation, we cannot say with certainty 'what works' in improving Indigenous equity. The evidence may well be available there, but it has not yet been systematically gathered, nor have the outcomes yet been considered carefully enough, nor has what is known been peer-reviewed and reported in appropriate academically rigorous outlets.

To assist in this regard, the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education has delivered a series of workshops in monitoring and evaluation, specifically the adoption of program logic modelling, to support enhanced documentation of equity program outputs, including those related to Indigenous higher education pathways. Similarly, findings generated through Indigenous focused HEPPP projects were recently shared at a national forum entitled 'Engagement at the Interface: Indigenous Pathways and Transitions into Higher Education' facilitated by the Office of Pro Vice Chancellor – Indigenous Leadership at Charles Darwin University in October 2015. Evidence generated through some of these projects is presented throughout this book.

Table 2.1 Longitudinal studies on equity groups needs and aspirations

Lead University	Project Title
La Trobe University	University access and achievement of people from out-of-home care backgrounds
University of Newcastle	Equity Groups and Predictors of Academic Success in Higher Education
University of Newcastle	Choosing University: the impact of schools and schooling
University of Melbourne	Developing a national framework for supporting rigorous equity programme evaluation
La Trobe University	Are LSES students disadvantaged in the university application process?
CQUniversity Australia	Best practice bridging: facilitating Indigenous participation through regional dual-sector universities
NCVER	Do individual background characteristics influence tertiary completion rates?
Flinders University	Educational outcomes of young Indigenous Australians
Deakin University	Secondary School Graduate Preferences for Bachelor Degrees and Institutions
University of South Australia	Exploring the experience of being first in family at university
University of Southern Queensland	Resilience/Thriving in Post-Secondary students with disabilities: an exploratory study
Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)	Completing university in a growing sector: is equity an issue?
University of Tasmania	Exploring the retention and performance of students with disability
Australian Council for Educational Research	Investigating the relationship between equity and graduate outcomes in Australia
University of Western Australia	Labour Market Outcomes of Disadvantaged University Students
Queensland University of Technology	The digital divide for Indigenous students in Learning Management Systems
University of Canberra	Best practice in supporting Indigenous students with disability in higher education
La Trobe University	Assessing descriptors of academic programme inherent requirements
University of Melbourne	A national review of the participation of people of refugee background in higher education
University of Newcastle	Capability, Belonging and Equity in Higher Education: Developing Inclusive Approaches
University of Adelaide	Exploring the experience of LSES students via enabling pathways
University of Tasmania	Supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Higher Education
Deakin University	Moving beyond 'acts of faith': effective scholarships for equity students
Curtin University	Access and Barriers to Online Education for People with Disabilities

Discordance

While we have identified clear synergies between equity and Indigenous higher education policy agendas, there are also discordant threads. These relate to epistemological and ontological dissonance between Western knowledge and Indigenous knowledge systems; the impact of colonisation on Indigenous students, when contrasted with other equity groups; the importance of culture, cultural competence and cultural safety; and the political context in which policy and program decisions are made (which we have previously discussed). We discuss each further below.

Epistemological and Ontological Dissonance

It is well documented that Indigenous knowledge systems are based on a strong sense of cultural identity, kinship, social and emotional wellbeing, spirituality, and connection to country. These are particularly important considerations within an Indigenous higher education policy landscape (Morgan 2003). As Morgan (2003, p. 36) aptly describes:

Despite the growing support for the principles and practice of equal opportunity and multiculturalism, and the growing appreciation and apparent accommodation of Indigenous knowledges in Western institutions, higher education is still dominated by a Western world-view that appropriates the views of other cultures. To thrive in a tertiary environment, Indigenous peoples, as with others from more holistic/ contextual cultures, have little choice but to participate in research and teaching programmes that either devalue or do not recognise their cultural identities.

As asserted, the Western knowledge paradigm that underpins the administration, management, research and teaching that occurs in most higher education institutions in Australia rarely aligns with Indigenous student epistemologies and ontologies (Sonn et al. 2007) and tends to dismiss concerns about Indigenous sovereignty (McCarty et al. 2005; McCarty and Lee 2014). There is little doubt that Indigenous Support Units have played a pivotal role in addressing this divide (Andersen et al. 2008; Trudgett 2009; Behrendt et al. 2012). Indeed, these units have been born out of a recognition that Indigenous students need to have a safe and culturally appropriate environment in which to study and learn (Andersen et al. 2008). They are a critical element of what a good Indigenous support structure looks and feels like within higher education in Australia (Behrendt et al. 2012). However, Equity Support Units (or the various iterations thereof) and Indigenous Support Units are often geographically and organisationally separated. That is, they often lie in different physical locations of the university and may even sit in different faculty areas. This means there is a systemic divide both spatially and organisationally within two intertwined policy domains – they are defined as being both similar and different.

There are good reasons for spatial separation. In the case of Indigenous Support Units, a dedicated space can support building a culturally safe study and work environment for students and Indigenous academics. There is strong evidence indi-

cating that this is an important element for supporting Indigenous participation in higher education (Dudgeon and Fielder 2006; Universities Australia 2011). From a theoretical perspective it represents a decolonisation of university spaces. From a practical viewpoint it creates a space that supports the development of self-identity, which in turn recognises the place of Indigenous knowledges, culture and sovereignty within an institutional setting (McCarty et al. 2005; Syron and McLaughlin 2010). However, this also distances Indigenous students and academics from other 'equity groups' who share similar barriers when attempting to access and participate in higher education. We argue this concept of 'othering' can perpetuate stereotypes and prejudice, thus reducing the potential to develop collective impact between Indigenous students and other equity groups.

However, Equity and Indigenous Support Units are not enough on their own. More often than not, Indigenous students are expected to learn and study in an academic environment that is faculty based, and in most cases geographically, philosophically and structurally distant from Indigenous Support Units. This was emphasised in the Behrendt Review, which acknowledged that Indigenous leadership must be a whole-of-university endeavour (Behrendt et al. 2012). While there is growing scholarship about how Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies can be incorporated into the curriculum of individual disciplines, in our experience implementation progress can be slow and often relies on a highly motivated staff member to drive such change.

Impact of Colonisation

There is substantial literature outlining the impact of colonisation on Indigenous cultures both in Australia and globally, including that relating to participation in higher education (Morgan 2003; Thaman 2003). Most Australian universities have partnered with Reconciliation Australia to develop Reconciliation Action Plans (RAP). This has been particularly notable over the last decade. RAPs acknowledge the atrocities of the past and the systematic erosion of Indigenous culture and provide an ongoing organisational commitment to build the trust and respect of Indigenous staff, students and the local Indigenous community. Drawing from the RAPs within our own universities such commitments include:

- Building on existing, mutually respectful and beneficial relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians;
- Promoting an understanding of Indigenous culture and history;
- Directing strategies towards the increased participation of Indigenous Peoples as students and staff in the full range of university activities;
- Continuing a commitment to indigenous research and development; and
- Developing a physical environment with sensitivity and respect for Indigenous traditions and beliefs through consultation with the local Aboriginal community.

These unique commitments are a critical step in making Indigenous students feel valued within higher education settings. They must continue to be actioned.

Culture, Cultural Competence and Cultural Safety

In addition to RAPs, some universities have taken significant steps to embed Indigenous knowledges into higher education curriculum (Behrendt et al. 2012; David et al. 2013), including a focus on Indigenous graduate attributes (Anning 2010). Other universities have taken steps to increase the cultural competence of their staff (Scott et al. 2013). Indeed, Universities Australia (2011) has developed a National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities. However, cultural competency development is a contested space and may not be restricted to Indigenous culture, which may mean there is very little Indigenous content incorporated into some training programs (Grote 2008). Nevertheless, the implementation of curriculum that incorporates Indigenous knowledges, the development of Indigenous graduate attributes and the delivery of cultural competency training are all important systemic steps in recalibrating the balance of power between Western and Indigenous knowledge systems. At present, most universities are still navigating ways to ensure staff are culturally competent and that learning environments are culturally safe for Indigenous students. Further work in this area needs to continue.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter we have examined the unique policy discourses associated with both the national equity in higher education agenda and the Indigenous higher education agenda. In doing so we have described how these two policy discourses are different, yet intimately intertwined. We have then described the synergies and discordance between these two agendas to illuminate the strengths and opportunities for promoting further alignment. While we have not fully unpacked what a strengths-based approach can look like in this context, we are confident that this chapter will spur a deeper discussion and inform further research prioritisation in this space. We acknowledge that there is no ‘magic bullet’ in achieving improved participation of equity groups and Indigenous students in higher education. However, there is capacity to enhance the cohesion, integration and interdependence between them, where values and world views coalesce. We trust that other chapters throughout this book provide further guidance in this regard.

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