

Indigenous Research and Broader Issues in the Academy

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All participants in this paper bring with them the knowledge of their Elders and ancestral spirits.

Abstract

The Rudd Labour Government rode to power in Australia on the education promise of ‘an education revolution’. The term ‘education revolution’ carries all the obligatory marketing metaphors that an aspirant government might want recognised by the general public on the eve government came to power however in revolutionary terms it fades into insignificance in comparison to the real revolution in Australian education. This revolution simply put is to elevate Indigenous Knowledge Systems, in Australian Universities. In the forty three years since the nation setting Referendum of 1967 a generation has made a beach head on the educational landscape. Now a further generation who having made it into the field of higher degrees yearn for the ways and means to authentically marshal Indigenous knowledge? The Institute of Koorie Education at Deakin has for over twenty years not only witnessed the transition but is also a leader in the field. With the appointment of two Chairs of Indigenous Knowledge Systems to build on to its already established research profile the Institute moved towards what is the ‘real’ revolution in education – the elevation of Indigenous Knowledge as a legitimate knowledge system. This paper lays out the Institute of Koorie Education’s Research Plan and the basis of an argument put to the academy that will be the driver for this pursuit.

Introduction

Institute of Koorie Education at Deakin has for over twenty years been a leader in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The Australian University Quality Agency (2005 p.35) named the Institute as an exemplar highlighting the innovative CBD (community-based delivery) model, a broad curriculum offered to Indigenous students and the pedagogical approach bolstered by tactical support. The heart of the Institute’s operation is its grounded relationship with the community through an agreement between Deakin University and the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI). This agreement enacted in 1991 included a ‘joint management’ platform placing the university and the community into a dynamic partnership. This agreement was further articulated through the University’s regulatory process and managed through the Board of the Institute of Koorie Education.

The Institute of Koorie Education is in Victoria the ‘University of Choice’ for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and nationally the third largest provider for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

A feature of the dynamic relationship is the position that Elders and Respected Persons hold at both strategic and functional levels. This plan was built on the wisdom of Victorian Elders and Respected Persons who were involved in every step of its development and creation. It is through their cumulative lived experiences that an Aboriginal lens on research was placed. In their lives that felt the flow and ebb of research fuelled government policies from the ‘Protectionist’ era through to ‘Closing the Gap’. These lived experiences of generations combined with the wisdom of their Eldership today provided some clear and distinct directions for ‘working with a new agenda’ in research. Their combined input as captured in the Research Plan recognises the seminal role they have as Elders and Respected Persons.

The Institute of Koorie Education in order to achieve this ‘new agenda in research’ has always been faithful to the integrity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge. That is why the Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan goes to great length to elevate and position Indigenous Knowledge as a system in its own right. Apologetic models tainted with degrees of comparative integration or assimilation with the Western dogma is not an option for the authentic positioning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge. The plan was drawn up through direct input of the Elders and in terms of the integrity the process has been as important as the product is. The Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan represents rigor in both the process and the production having challenged the Western principled notion of academic freedom. Despite this and with encouragement of the University’s chief executive Vice Chancellor, Professor Sally Walker the plan was presented for open debate at academic board. The core principle enshrined in the plan is primacy of Indigenous Knowledge. The Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan is in no way subserviently attendant to western knowledge or either an adjunct component part of it. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges are discrete, fully functional knowledge systems in their own right and distinctive in that they are possibly the world’s oldest knowledge traditions. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges have legitimate claim to primacy as knowledge systems.

This is part of a dynamic movement that Indigenous people are making across the world in order to redress the one most severe genocidal causality, the colonisation of the mind. With the proliferation of research grounded in Indigenous Knowledge embedded colonial assimilative structures will be challenged as will no doubt the actual primacy of the Western creed. No longer will Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people be forced to their knees as both researchers and the researched to genuflect at the altar of Western ontology but they will be liberated by the freedoms of Indigenous Knowledge and will bring a balanced worldview to the academy. This is what true revolutions of change are made of and the Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan sends up a flare to the broader academy of the thirty nine Australian universities as an initial salvo in the revolution.

Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan

Preamble

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people belong to the oldest continuous intellectual tradition. For centuries, ‘ways of knowing’ have passed from generation to generation in forms that predate and eclipse the printing press and the great universities of the Middle Ages which are the iconic rudiments of western knowledge. Life as we know it today revolves around competing knowledge systems be they global/local, disciplinary, commercial, technical and national and within this competition for primacy sits a contest for the hierarchical positioning of knowledge. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge as a national and educational resource, has for too long been subjugated to levels of tokenistic opportunism and novelty by the broader academy. The appointment of two ‘Chairs of Indigenous Knowledge Systems’ is a dynamic statement by Deakin University that recognises the significant work that the Institute of Koorie Education has made in teaching, learning and research over two decades and with community endorsement, sets new agenda in intellectual and community engagement.

Working with a new Agenda

Consistent with the Institutes’ values that are grounded in community principles and engagement, direction for this plan was sought by way of a workshop that was held with Victorian Elders and Respected Persons. The workshop delivered a clear and distinct message on research generally and within its dimensions a new agenda. For too long the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and their communities have been buffeted by research agendas that simply put, ‘took without giving’. Elders and Respected Persons called for ‘honest research’ based upon the principles of trust, integrity, transparency and ethics. While these are not inconsistent with ‘best practice’ models of general research, the core issue here for community groups is the notion of access and positioning within the research protocol. The challenge that was put to the Institute by the Elders and Respected Persons was repositioning the community from a passive subject base to a place of empowered ownership. This ownership extends to instigation. High level quality research is expensive and usually ‘done’ to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and not instigated by them. Community Empowered Research as an agenda of the Institute of Koorie Education will work with community and community organisations to either assist, or even conduct, projects that they would not normally be able to embark upon. In short, as a result of our involvement with Community Empowered Research projects the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be enhanced as either participants of, or drivers in, research projects.

Goal

The overall goal of the Institute of Koorie Education Research Agenda 2009-2012 is:

To enhance in a culturally authentic manner the capacity and capability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to manage their knowledge in research contexts

Aims

In order to do this, the Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan 2009-2012 intends to:

1. Enhance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge capacity through higher degree programs by using community based delivery modes.
2. Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in research projects that surface, affirm, apply and secure Indigenous Knowledge.
3. Facilitate community-based research into critical questions or issues in partnership with individuals, communities and community organisations through knowledge solutions.

Background

The Board of the Institute of Koorie Education developed the *Koorie Research Program Ethics, Protocols and Methodologies Discussion Paper* (Atkinson, Henry, James et. al., 1994). The Institute of Koorie Education Board also proposed the development of a Research Centre (IKE 1998). Both documents highlight the importance of communities and working with people in communities in order to undertake research. The proposal for the development of a Centre was not implemented however a growing research program has been established. This has been strengthened through increasing postgraduate completions, including three Indigenous research doctorates over 2006-7. The continuing growth of Indigenous research and Indigenous research capacity in the Institute of Koorie Education is now to be encouraged and supported within Deakin University (Deakin University 2008). The Institute of Koorie Education, Research Plan will therefore, be responsive to community research aspirations and researcher capacity growth while working in partnership with the University.

The Institute of Koorie Education, Research Plan will focus such growth by dovetailing into Deakin University's goals, strategies and its Research and Research Training Plan 2008-2012. Deakin University's goal for Research and Research Training is:

To improve Deakin's research performance so that it is in the top third of the Australian higher education sector by building a critical mass of researchers who will develop a distinctive portfolio of high quality discovery, applied and commercial research.

The Institute of Koorie Education, Research Plan is also cognisant of the 2007-2012 Indigenous Education Statement and is aligned with Indigenous Higher Education Policy. The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC), for example, seeks to "encourage the development of a climate in Australian higher education where the level of Indigenous postgraduate enrolment increases; the number of Indigenous researchers increases; and, Indigenous research is strengthened and enhanced" (Commonwealth of Australia 2007, p.2). The follow-up *Ngapartji Ngapartji –Yerra: Stronger Futures* IHEAC conference report progresses this position by setting out to "begin a new era of collaboration capable of

transforming the sector and building the capacity of Indigenous Higher education to provide stronger futures for Indigenous people” (Commonwealth of Australia 2007, p.11) through a national strategy for Indigenous research, building capacity and providing funding support among other matters (Commonwealth of Australia 2007, p.18, 19).

Cultural Research Integrity Protocol

At the Elders and Respected Persons workshop a clear and distinct call for *‘honest research’* based upon the principles of trust, integrity, transparency and ethics was made. This is partly captured in the second aim of the Research Plan by;

–Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in research projects that surface, affirm, apply and secure Indigenous Knowledge”

The issue of being able to secure Indigenous Knowledge is one that was projected by Elders and Respected Persons as a significant issue. At the workshop, we were questioned about our responsibility to ensure not only the integrity of our work but the research capacity of the broader university. Therefore, the Cultural Research Integrity Protocol (CRIP) will look beyond baseline University Ethics to preserve the cultural integrity of the project at the same time protect the Deakin brand within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. In order to do this, a mapping of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research that is undertaken under the auspice of Deakin, including collaborative and commercial ventures will be captured. Every research project will be open to audit and review using following principles:-

- Adherence to University or other appropriate ethical standard
eg NHMRC, NEAF.
- Adherence to AIATSIS or other appropriate guidelines:
Inclusion of Statewide Organisations in involvement and engagement;
Local negotiation;
Evidence of authentic community involvement and engagement;
Statement of value;
Statement of reimbursement for investment by community; and,
Residual relationship with the community.

Aim	Methods	Measured
<p><i>Enhance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge capacity through higher degree programs using community based delivery modes.</i></p>	<p>Promoting, attracting, supporting and supervising through to completion, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Masters and PhD programs.</p> <p>Workshop promotion to honours students.</p> <p>Conducting “in communities” research incubation workshops.</p>	<p>Growth rate of formal enrolments and completions.</p> <p>Number of workshops held.</p> <p>Number of workshops held.</p>
<p><i>Working closely and with respect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in projects that surface, affirm, apply and secure Indigenous Knowledge.</i></p>	<p>Where appropriate and where invited, work with the community on issues of surfacing local knowledge, including the necessary protocols that secure ownership by the community. These include assisting with knowledge management systems.</p> <p>Working predominantly with and directed by the community, produce knowledge collaborations in various media formats that further Indigenous Knowledge Systems.</p>	<p>Number of community engagements held.</p> <p>Number of workshops on research and ethics.</p> <p>Number of written and other collaborations produced.</p> <p>Number of invited speaking engagements.</p> <p>Number of research activities completed.</p>
<p><i>Facilitate community-based solutions to critical questions/issues in partnership with individuals, communities and community organisations through research.</i></p>	<p>Where appropriate and where invited work with the community on stages of research in order to transfer skill on matters that require community-based solutions and knowledge control.</p> <p>Where appropriate and where invited work with the community on stages of research in order to transfer skill on matters that require community-based solutions by way of knowledge solutions.</p>	<p>Number of community engagements held.</p>

Aboriginal Knowledge Validity in the Academy

The *Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan* (above) while setting out aims and strategies to increase research and higher degree researchers includes a statement titled Cultural Research Integrity Protocol (CRIP) which intends to look “beyond baseline University Ethics to preserve the cultural integrity of the project at the same time protect the Deakin brand

within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community”. This may be research to undertake a desktop review and analysis or, other activities which may lead to Indigenous knowledge being captured through research that does not or, has not, required the researcher to apply for ethical clearance through the Deakin University Research and Ethics Committee (DUHREC). Moreover, it may be research that represents for disadvantage. This section of the plan therefore challenges the Institute of Koorie Education to “secure Indigenous Knowledge” as is “our responsibility to ensure not only the integrity of our work but the research capacity of the broader university”. This challenge goes to the heart of the complex issues resulting from a denial of the validity of Indigenous knowledge in all activities in Australia including the academy.

The *mapping* and *audit* notions in this statement are considered to be a challenge on Academic Freedom.

Background

At present all research dealing with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people that involves engagement (interviews, stories, focus groups etc) or invasive activities (blood extraction, skin analysis etc) must undergo review through an application to DUHREC. An application is developed on the National Ethics Application Form (NEAF) for the Human Ethics Committee through DHUREC). The NEAF captures the principles of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Islander Studies protocols document (AIATSIS 2000) and the National Health and Medical Research Guidelines (NHMRC 2007). Such DUHREC applications are also forwarded to the Institute of Koorie Education (to be reviewed by one of the Chairs in Indigenous Knowledge Systems). Therefore, the majority of research which may impact on Aboriginal Knowledge Systems is presently subject to ethical clearance through a detailed application and review.

Indigenous people the world over and, in this instance, in Australia continue to experience numerous difficulties in an environment created by colonial invasion which took the land of those invaded and disallowed/denied the knowledge of the people of those lands. In fact, Indigenous people themselves are considered *Terra Nullius* or ‘empty’ intellectually (Rigney 1999). Butler (2001) subsequently argued, the overturning of the notion of *Terra Nullius* in Australia has not resolved ideology positing Indigenous Knowledge lacks substance. Universities along with every other aspect of the system under which Indigenous peoples now live therefore wield a power through which various features devalue, undermine and deny knowledge diversity. Assimilation through application of such aspects therefore occurs with an invisibility that is numbing and deeply destructive to Indigenous people. The validity of Indigenous knowledge is denied.

Let us consider standards, quality processes or the Excellence in Research Australia (ERA) as each of these areas, is constructed to address Western Knowledge (the disciplines) within the academy. Additionally, the whole system is governed to achieve outcomes in a western world

in denial of diversity and the different knowledge domains such diversity brings. Universities mirror this model of governance although the university demands the freedom to operate in its own right. However, driven by and responding to, external governance requirements ultimately demands assimilation into the 'protected' western canon at all levels and in numerous ways. This situation locks Indigenous people's knowledge, its processes and its practices out of the academy, trivialising same as an addendum. This is where Academic Freedom exists.

Academic Freedom according to The Australia Institute in 2001 (quoted in Commonwealth of Australia 2008, p.5) is defined as the right to "teach, research and publish on contentious issues, choose their own research colleagues: and speak on social issues without fear or favour in areas of their expertise...balanced by responsible and disciplined exercise of scholarly expertise". However, Professor Jackson notes "academic freedom is a limited doctrine, hedged about with qualification" (Commonwealth of Australia 2008, p.6). At the same time, the report affirms universities "have long been incubators of new theories and the promoters of the orthodoxies of tomorrow" (Commonwealth of Australia 2008, p.6). Academic Freedom is a feature of this western canon – a constructed/position – which applies in the academy.

Making the above statements does not deny Indigenous Knowledge does not have a similar notion of freedom, whereby one is expected to act within certain protocols, to protect and ensure the sustainability of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Knowledge. However, it must be noted the starting point for such positions is vastly different. Notably, Indigenous Knowledge validity is argued by Indigenous scholars the world over (Cajete 1994; Ermine 1995; Kwagley 2006; Graveline 1998; Laduke 1994; Meyer 2003; West 2000, Martin 2003; Arbon 2008) as the relationship of humans with the land and all within it and the sky, as central to their respective knowledge positions.

Clearly the later is a fundamentally different knowledge domain to that of the western canon (and its disciplines) which tends to be constructed on notions of exploitation or equity without acknowledgement of this relatedness or inter-connectedness or a critique of the power existent in the system. Thus, denying the colonising power cemented at the core and the basis of relatedness within Indigenous knowledge.

The Elders and Respected Persons identified and articulated through the Institute of Koorie education Research Plan, "an opportunity with the appointment of the two Chairs in Indigenous Knowledge Systems to not only affirm Aboriginal Knowledge but negotiate the validity of such knowledge and, responsiveness to it in the academy". The issue is therefore, a request for a fundamental recognition of other knowledge positions and respectful negotiations to ensure such knowledge is no longer obliterated within the academy. Ultimately this is to do with sustainability – social, economic and environmental sustainability for Indigenous people and for Australia. However, in this instance the request is directed toward research activities undertaken under the auspices of the University.

It should be noted that the issue of compatibility and congruence of differing Knowledge Systems is also being debated on a world stage. In May 2002 the WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organisation) a specialised agency of the United Nations carried out a comprehensive review of Intellectual Property and Traditional Knowledge, Genetic Resources and Folklore. Resting on an international law principle of ‘*Sui generis*’ a Latin phrase meaning of its own kind calls for ‘a *sui generis system* for Traditional Knowledge protection are sometimes heard. This could mean a system entirely distinct from the current intellectual property (IP) system, or alternatively a system with new IP, or IP-like, rights’. CRIP therefore is philosophically and practically in sync with WIPO and the world movement that has had very little traction in Australia. The opportunity therefore exists, if embraced by the broader University, to position Deakin as a national and world leader both in the eyes of Elders as well as the United Nations. It is therefore time to move beyond old models of power and domination to ones of respectful negotiated agreement of what is important to such sustainability.

Conclusion

As far as revolutions go the Australian Education Revolution may come and go and in time be judged, destined and dispatched to history. This paper introduces and provides a couple of excerpts concerning Indigenous research and knowledge within Deakin University. The first is the Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan and the second a subsequent paper provided to the Vice Chancellor and the Academic Board as the basis to ongoing discussions concerning Academic Freedom. Notably, the subliminal yet central focus of the Research Plan is to challenge western research to move out of their comfort zones and in their epistemological pursuit engage multiple knowledge systems. Beyond mere altruism this is a complex notion of rigor. The real revolution is therefore to be able to work respectfully from differing epistemologies in different contexts for the advantage of knowledge diversity. Indigenous Knowledge is therefore the seat of the real revolution in education and the fight goes on.

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