

# Protocols of engagement with Indigenous communities to address postgraduate enrolments

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## **Abstract**

*The commitment by universities to foster a collegial and mutually respectful collaboration with Indigenous communities has been seen as a major step forward in addressing systemic barriers that have historically isolated communities from enjoying the fruits of such a relationship. To enable this commitment to build long-term benefits that are mutually sustainable, cultural protocols and ethical standards must be adopted to ensure outcomes are both systemically and culturally acceptable for Indigenous communities and the university sector. Such standards must provide opportunities for Indigenous people to be involved in the development and implementation of policies and practices designed to guide and inform programs around research, teaching, support and governance initiatives. This is particularly important to the engagement of Indigenous postgraduate students. This paper will address the development of a national and international Indigenous postgraduate forum and global Elders alliance, which is being proposed by World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) to address these and other issues as they pertain to the enrolment and progression of Indigenous students at the postgraduate level.*

*For ease of reading, the use of the term Indigenous (unless otherwise noted) will refer to Global Indigenous peoples.*

## **Introduction**

Indigenous Elders are our book of knowledge. The emerging global Indigenous academy must, in the future, guide members of the western academy on how to utilise these books in meaningful and respectful ways. Indigenous academics must also be prepared to work with Elders in culturally and academically mentoring Indigenous postgraduate students as part of their commitment to providing leadership within their families and tribes. These leaders will help to address the absence of cultural protocols in the development of academic programs and research, which have for too long helped to isolate our people from self-determining our own interest (Indigenous Elder, 2012).

In the absence of a significant cohort of Indigenous cultural supervisors, the move by WINHEC to establish a global network of Indigenous postgraduates, students and Elders will be integral to the development and implementation of the Global Indigenous Academy and the provision of emerging leaders within the sector and the community who are intellectually and culturally astute. The integrity and scholarship of Elders and Indigenous academics currently excluded from the supervision of Indigenous postgraduate students and research will become more accessible as the Global Indigenous Academy, under WINHEC, develops. This move by WINHEC to grow the Global Indigenous Academy will provide a cultural alternative to build upon the plethora of reports produced by non-Indigenous researchers who, for too long, used Indigenous voices to legitimise their work without due recognition being given to the Elders and academics as their source. The development of a national and international Indigenous postgraduate forum and a global Elders alliance through WINHEC will therefore profile the voices of Indigenous academics, researchers, and Elders in addressing these issues.

Carjuzaa and Fenimore-Smith (n.d.) succinctly place contemporary Indigenous research, stating that:

Although Indigenous peoples continue to be the most researched peoples worldwide, research in Indigenous communities is becoming more politicized as tribal [Indigenous] communities voice their desire to maintain control over their knowledge and resources.

The panoply of Indigenous research voices are slowly breaking free from the Western paradigm of research, establishing a place for themselves and their research within the academy. Kuokkanen (2000) positions Indigenous 'epistemological truth' [by stating it] is created and restored by storytelling, discussions, evaluation of previous activities, memorized experiences and phenomena as well as through intuition."

On the other hand the Western research paradigm is sterile and devoid of an 'authoritative' voice on cultural issues, the participants are silent observers and the cultural authority often relegated to a position of insignificance or that of a minor role. Maracle (1992 cited in Kuokkanen, 2000) notes that:

Academics waste a great deal of effort deleting character, plot, and story from theoretical arguments. By referring to instances and examples, previous human interaction, and social events, academics convince themselves of their own objectivity and persuade us that the story is no longer a story... It takes a lot of work to delete the emotional and passionate self from story, to de-humanize story into "theory". So we [Indigenous peoples] don't do it. We humanize theory by fusing humanity's need for common direction-theory-with story.

The visionary Crow Chief Plenty Coups understood the implications and importance of education stating: "Education is your most powerful weapon. With education, you are the white man's [sic] equal; without education, you are his [sic] victim, and so shall remain all your lives" (Little Big Horn College, 2009) The Elders give us the knowledge to ensure that we are no longer victims, and the current Indigenous global academy will give us the tools to ensure we can use this knowledge so we remain equals.

Indigenous Elders hold the cultural authority for Indigenous peoples and often ask the difficult questions of universities on behalf of their people and are then engaged to instruct the sector as to how to address them here in Australia. By encouraging partnerships that develop Indigenous postgraduates within the Indigenous academy, the Elders are ensuring that the future of the Indigenous academy is culturally competent to undertake such rigorous research. Global Elders, through their guidance, encouragement, and support ensure that both the current and future Indigenous academics hold true the ideals of cultural integrity, accuracy, and sustainability.

Equally important is the role of Indigenous postgraduates for without these aspiring academics, the future lifeblood of the Indigenous academy and the future leadership of communities would be severely limited. With this in mind Indigenous postgraduate students look to the Elders and the Indigenous academics to help them become culturally competent to undertake the arduous research that they will need to engage in to bring about change within the lives of their communities in the future. They aspire, through the guidance, encouragement, and support of the Elders, to hold true the ideals of cultural accountability, accuracy, and sustainability.

Even though limited in numbers, it is the global Indigenous academy, that currently attempts to ensure that Indigenous research and researchers adopt the skills required to pass the rigorous conventions of the contemporary global western academy. This cohort of academics should be the guiding link between the Elders, the western academy, and the Indigenous researchers both early career and postgraduate. It is their role to transcribe the Elders' wishes/community needs, into achievable academic research with meaningful outcomes for both the researchers' and communities. Academia is a contrary society that can be difficult to negotiate successfully, however, like all societies it is easier to negotiate when guided by someone from within that society. However, the role of Indigenous academics within the sector is often limited because the systems' historical incapacity to adopt a framework that promotes and links the inclusion of Indigenous postgraduate students and leadership.

The commitment by universities to increase Indigenous involvement in the development and implementation of policies and practices designed to guide and inform programs around research, teaching, support and governance initiatives will be limited while cultural barriers continue to exist. This will continue to effect the engagement of Indigenous Elders, academics and students at the postgraduate level while the scholarship of cultural protocols and ethical standards continue to be negated. The development and adoption of such policies, protocols, and practices is of paramount importance if the sector is serious about the engagement of Indigenous people within the Higher Education sector both nationally and internationally, particularly at the postgraduate level (Robertson, 2012).

There is no one Indigenous cohort within the Higher Education sector that can develop such policies, protocols, and practices on behalf of the entire Indigenous sector. It needs the wisdom and guidance of the Elders to ensure the cultural integrity is addressed locally. Such an initiative will fail without the backing, guidance, and input of Elders working in collaboration with the Indigenous academics within the contemporary Indigenous academy. This will profile the value of cultural scholarship within the western academy whilst also ensuring that the initiative surpasses the conventions of the present-day academy both globally and within their nation-states. Nonetheless, such a process also needs to be inclusive of the Indigenous postgraduates as they are the future academics, the researchers and those who will be equipped to more readily support the development of the next generation of postgraduates. If they are not considered as, serious stakeholders they will not take ownership of it and therefore it is unlikely to have currency for them. Consequently, it is unlikely that during the evolution of these postgraduates becoming the new academy these policies, protocols and practices will be in danger of being discarded and the academy will continue to be culturally sterile and outdated.

It is increasingly recognised that there must be a knowledge transition plan between Elders, Indigenous academics, and postgraduate students in order to retain the historical and corporate knowledge within the business, political and historical sectors of universities and nation-states. Individual businesses and corporations ensure the retention of their corporate knowledge is protected through transition plans. Nation-states keep their historical knowledge cohesively, while both correcting and adding historical knowledge to build upon and protect the knowledge of previous historians. Similarly, families ensure the preservation of their history through knowledge transition from one generation to the next. This is a knowledge transition plan in action in its most basic form. While knowledge transition holds a unique position in the lives of Indigenous people, it is important that such a process be included in the development of Indigenous postgraduate students.

It is imperative that Indigenous peoples' knowledge, culture, histories, and protocols are preserved for future generations. The most astute way in which to achieve this is through knowledge transition. Within the academic sphere, this knowledge transition must be the realm of Indigenous academics and Elders. The adoption of a knowledge transition plan within Indigenous postgraduate enrolment would also incorporate processes around cultural competencies, graduate attributes, and responsive community research. As generations of Indigenous families unfold, and Elders with cultural knowledge pass on at a concerning rate, the synergy between Indigenous postgraduate progression, higher education and cultural heritage and protection becomes all the more important.

The time of the Pharaoh's has passed and the Pharaoh culture is extinct. However, the knowledge of its existence, customs, laws, and belief exist in the pictographs/hieroglyphics. Nevertheless, these stories are still in the process of being understood with the de-codifying of the messages/lessons within the hieroglyphics. Notwithstanding this, there is no guarantee that we have deciphered the code correctly and are in fact reading the correct story. The knowledge transition of the time of the Pharaohs was broken and all direct knowledge lost.

If contemporary Indigenous cultures do not want to have the same fate befall them as the Pharaohs, they need to actively ensure the lineation of the knowledge transition is unbroken from one generation to the

next. Within academia, it is especially important that this knowledge transition be maintained in culturally appropriate ways that retain its integrity whilst surpassing the scrutiny and rigors that are often imposed within the Western academy.

This creates a difficult cultural/research paradigm for experienced Indigenous academics and a cultural and academic minefield for inexperienced Indigenous early career academics and postgraduates. Successfully navigating these minefields can be achieved through accessing the cultural integrity of the Elders and the guidance of the Indigenous academics within the academy.

The Indigenous Elders forum proposed by WINHEC will prove to be a unique forum through which the corporate knowledge of their nation-states can be included in global initiatives of interest. It has taken the western education system an enormous amount of time to come to some recognition that this knowledge is important, needs preservation and elevating to an equal status to their own Western canon. Predominantly it is in first world nations where this recognition has begun. Although this is in itself, a huge step there is a considerable way to go before there is an equally significant recognition of the meritorious value of cultural knowledge in the western system. The academy is not yet at a point where Indigenous knowledge is given a platform of acceptance equal to that of non-Indigenous knowledge and it is in the area of postgraduate supervision where this cultural anomaly is most obvious (Robertson, 2012).

It is a devastating fact that many of the global esteemed Indigenous Elders, 'the cultural states men and women' are passing before they have had a chance to add to the Indigenous knowledge reservoir profiled within the sector. Another distressing fact is that while Indigenous knowledge is not given rightful recognition within the sector, many of the future global Indigenous academy leaders (Indigenous postgraduates) are not able to interact with the Elders as cultural supervisors within their studies. Their only recourse is to rely on the present Indigenous academy to pass on the teachings and guidance that they received from these Elders. However, the Indigenous academics are not positioned within the sector as supervisors they are not in a position to pass this knowledge on as postgraduate supervisors themselves and the transition of that knowledge is therefore impeded.

Established partnership links between the Elders and the current Indigenous academics within the academy will ensure that the Elders knowledge, protocols and guidance is passed on. It will also ensure that the localised research needs of Indigenous peoples' are highlighted and undertaken in a manner that produces meaningful outcomes for these communities. "It is important for Indigenous researchers to share stories in ways which are culturally relevant and useful" (Rose et.al, n.d.).

Researchers are too much humbug; we don't get to do any work, too many coming, all the time. Who sent you and what is this for? We have been researched to death! You mob want to come and talk, talk but it doesn't help us much. We get nothing out of this; we never see anything, just humbug! (Cited in Sithole et al., 2009)

Some (outside researchers) you are happy and you like them but you not sure what they are doing, no one really explains about this 'research' thing my dear. Yeah I have worked with them mob, many times but only helping like. I work with different mob, but never feel I was like them mob (Cited in Sithole et al., 2009).

There are many stories like these and the researchers are not always non-Indigenous. The only way to ensure these sorts of stories do not keep being perpetuated is through 'proper mentoring cultural way' through the Elders and current Indigenous academy. There is a need to saturate the research market with appropriate culturally trained Indigenous researchers to ensure that any research concerning Indigenous peoples cannot claim that there is a lack of suitably qualified Indigenous researchers available.

The Elders are the conduits between Indigenous communities and the Indigenous academy. They bind the two together in addition to ensuring that the right research is undertaken in a manner that is culturally

sensitive, ensuring that the cultural protocols and ethical standards are systemically and culturally acceptable (Robertson, 2012).

By forming partnerships with Elders, the western academy will ensure it has credibility within the community. It will also ensure that the research has the best chance of success of engaging Indigenous communities, as they are more likely to make themselves available to be involved in research if it has Elder involvement and endorsement. The community is also more likely to be involved and have genuine interaction with the research if they can see meaningful outcomes for the community and that their Elders are participating.

In the early 1990s, a group of Indigenous Australian postgraduates undertook a research project culminating in the report *Research Project into the Barriers which Indigenous Students must Overcome in Undertaking Postgraduate Studies: Indigenous Perspectives of Postgraduate Education* (CAPA, 1997). The key barrier to Indigenous-Australian postgraduate study identified in this report almost 20 years ago are unfortunately still barriers today: Supervision, Mentoring and Support, Raising Expectations, and Cultural Differences, to name a few. More recently, the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) also found the same issues as barriers to Indigenous postgraduate studies (IHEAC, 2006, 2008, 2010).

Although for different reasons, appropriate postgraduate supervision is still a key issue. In the 90s, Indigenous-Australian postgraduates called for access to Indigenous-Australian co-supervisors, often Elders or other esteemed knowledgeable people, as they recognized that this would be a critical way in which to address the concerns they were experiencing with their studies. Initially this was a difficult task to achieve, as there was institutional resistance. (CAPA, 1997)

Through the student's insistence, there are an increasing number of Indigenous-Australians students demanding access to Indigenous-Australian supervisors. Whilst there are some examples of Elders being engaged as cultural supervisors, access to cultural supervisors is something that is yet to be formally recognized and adhered to by a large percentage of universities across the sector. The high ratio of Indigenous postgraduates to the availability of Indigenous supervisors continues to impede many Indigenous postgraduates from accessing culturally astute supervisors. This can have serious implications for their postgraduate progress and for their research. It is difficult to maintain research and/or postgraduate benchmarks if you are constantly having to 'teach the teacher' cultural aspects of your research and/or the reasons why they are included in your postgraduate work. Having an Indigenous academic as a supervisor eliminates the 'teach the teachers' aspect of the work and having an Elder ensures the cultural content is both accurate and presented in a culturally credible manner.

Currently there are few among the Australian Indigenous academies that take on the role of mentoring Indigenous postgraduates. This may mean they handpick particular ones to succeed and nurture and at the other end of the spectrum, they simply do not engage with Indigenous postgraduates. It is very hard to find Indigenous academics willing to supervise Indigenous postgraduates although all claim they are willing. The reality (as National Indigenous Postgraduate Association Aboriginal Corporation (NIPAAC) has found) is this is not always the case.

So how can the continuity of cultural integrity be assured. WINHEC has the capacity to ensure this continuity through the development of a Global Indigenous Postgraduate Network/Alliance/Consortium, similar to the Global Indigenous Elder Alliance, by making this network/alliance/consortium a formal organisation under WINHEC's stewardship. Exactly what this network/alliance/consortium would resemble has yet to be determined. However, it is imperative that Indigenous Postgraduates develop this conception in consultation with WINHEC and the Global Indigenous Elders Alliance.

As Rose states,

“contemporary” Indigenous research demands dual currencies. If research is truly aimed at bringing about significant paradigm shifts, then it needs to be read and interpreted by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. ... Research which crosses the bridge in multiple ways of knowing and being has the potential to foster the development and expression of authentic identity and to make a rich contribution to our collective knowing and wisdom. (Rose, et.al, n.d.)

Paton adds Indigenous people “look at everything in an inter-related and inter-connected way. [They] don’t see things in isolation” (Rose, et.al, n.d.). Therefore, Indigenous research needs to be conducted from an Indigenous paradigm with Indigenous cultural integrity. This integrity can only be guaranteed by the participation of Elders and the Indigenous academy. This will enable research to be conducted in a way that meets both cultural and institutional standards and ensure that a knowledge transition plan is in place.

In concluding this paper was developed to raise concerns around Indigenous postgraduate students, the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and knowledge transitions plans and the responsibility of Indigenous academics to take on a more rigorous mentoring role for Indigenous students engaging in postgraduate studies within the sector. The concerns outlined in this paper will hopefully act to encourage the current global Indigenous academy to be more responsive to the needs of the up and coming Indigenous academy. Indigenous postgraduate students have a critical role to play in the debate about cultural progression and protection and research the world over. “Every society needs educated people, but the primary responsibility of educated people is to bring wisdom back into the community and make it available to others so that the lives they are leading make sense” (Deloria cited in Carjuzaa and Fenimore-Smith, n.d.). Indigenous communities are no exception to this situation.

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**Acknowledgements**

I wish to acknowledge the listening assistance of colleagues and friends who either listened to me or gave me guidance on aspects of this paper during its conceptual stages, Mr Gavin Klibbe, Ms Michaela Costigan. The latter gave invaluable feedback on the draft paper. Furthermore, without the financial support of the ICEPP Office and the Griffith University Council of Elders, I would not have been able to present this paper at the 2012 WINHEC Indigenous Research Conference in Taiwan. Thank you to all, I greatly appreciate it.