University elevates Indigenous knowledge: Endorsement of the Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan 2010

Aunty Joan Vickery, Aunty Alma Thorpe, Aunty Melva Johnson, Aunty Kella Robinson, Aunty Merle Bamblett, Aunty Georgina Williams, Uncle Graham Austin, Aunty Rose Bamblett, Aunty Beverley Peters, Aunty Laura Bell, Aunty Lyn McInnes, Esme Bamblett, Lisa Thorpe, Helen Kennedy, Angela Clarke, Nicole Waddell, Annette Vickery, Jan Muir, Rosie Smith, Irene Morris, Veronica Arbon, Mark Rose, Wendy Brabham

All participants in this paper bring with them the knowledge of their Elders and Ancestral Spirits.

Abstract

The notion of Academic Freedom snarled the endorsement of the Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan at the Academic Board of Deakin University requiring discussion, written arguments and a presentation with the full authoritative direction of Elders and Respected Persons/Knowledgeable Others. This resulted in elevation of arguments on the primacy of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the ruling on the Research Plan several months later. This paper progress a previous article through outlining achievements and discussion of one aspect of this necessary work within and external to the University.

Introduction

In the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) Journal of 2010 we reported on the status of the *Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan* at Deakin University that had encountered impediments in its university approval process due to the Cultural Research Integrity Protocols (CRIP) framed within the document. The issue that the journal article surfaced was centred on the notion that the plan's construction presented a challenge to issues of 'academic freedom' for the broader university. This caused the Institute of Koorie Education's research plan to be stalled while a raft of meetings, position papers and finally a presentation to Academic Board was held. While this was conducted in the highest echelon of Western Knowledge construct a parallel discourse was also happening in the highest echelon of Indigenous Knowledge – Elders and Respected Persons / Knowledgeable Others led these discussions.

The Institute of Koorie Education at Deakin in its twenty fifth year is regarded a leader in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education across the nation and, internationally. At the very core of Institute's operation and ethos is authentic relationship with the communities of Indigenous students and staff that is enshrined instrumentally with a unique 'joint management agreement' with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI). The submission of the Institutes research plan is a testament to the many years of dreams and hard work that has evolved and crafted an Institute that is so grounded within the communities it seeks to serve. The fruition of the plan is predicated on achieving a 'new agenda in research' faithful to the integrity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge and these communities.

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. Other more apologetic models tainted with degrees of comparative integration or assimilation with the Western dogma was not an option for the authentic positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge in the view of the Institute and the Elders and Respected Persons / Knowledgeable Others. The

plan was drawn up through their direct input and in terms of their integrity. The plan represented this rigor in both the process and the production having challenged the Western principled notion of academic freedom. As a foundation behind nurturing and giving strength is the relationship that the Institute has with Elders and Respected Persons / Knowledgeable Others. This dynamic and enduring relationship directs and was pivotal in the escalation of Indigenous Knowledge through the Academic Board ruling on the *Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan—working with a New Agenda in Community Empowered Research* (*Attachment 2*) and the *ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION OR APPROVAL ABORIGINAL KNOWLEDGE VALIDITY* (Attachment 1).

Vestige of the colonial past

In 1872 an effervescent Victorian Colony, cashed up from a gold rush and tempered by a failed revolution sought to flex its burgeoning democratic maturity by enacting through a ground breaking fiat that became law and made education free, secular and compulsory for all. This experiment in social and educational democracy was led by James Wilberforce Stephen who as Attorney General in the Francis government sought to avert chronic child labour abuse conditions. The Education Act of 1872 carried with it a progressive sense of egalitarianism, accessibility and clearly delineated lines of separation between state and church. Symbiotically however the Education Act of 1872 was far from being value neutral and for a time enacted what was effectively a government monopoly on knowledge systems. This was reflected at its very core and articulated demonstratively a curriculum that actively muted Aboriginal knowledge and effectively relegated it into invisibility and potential oblivion, "the curriculum devoid of Indigenous perspectives presents as a bland cadaverous offering that would for decades distort the nation's national identity" (Rose 2011, Page 1). This vestige continued and regenerated itself infusing and contaminating all the other strands that make up the various arms of the Australian education sector and the ramifications of which are still well felt today. The case that embodied the submission to the Deakin University Academic Board was not an endeavour for mere recognition – but an acceptance of the argument posed for positioning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge alongside western knowledge as knowledge systems in their own right.

This argument emanated from Elders and Respected Persons / Knowledgeable Others is captured in the constructs of the plan and prosecuted through university mechanisms including the academic board by Professors Brabham, Arbon and Rose.

A case for primacy

The thirty nine universities blanketing the nation many of which are held up as world best practice present even today as agents of this relegation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island knowledge systems. Apart from mere tokenistic

or symbolic gestures often enforced by Federal Education requirements on the whole they continue to place Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island knowledge in a position of subservience. From research codes that process Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island issues as derivatives of western knowledge to administrative, personnel and infrastructure one of the world's oldest intellectual traditions is rendered an adjunct or appendage in deference to the knowledge of the newer western tradition.

That is why the Deakin University's Academic Board ruling on the *Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan* presents as a seminal mark on the Australian education landscape. The ruling notes that Indigenous knowledge systems claim 'primacy' with western and other knowledge systems and this immediately differentiates Deakin University as what is to be believed as the first university in the land to do so.

By claiming primacy as a principle neither Deakin University nor the 'Elders and Respected Persons / Knowledgeable Others', who stood firm on this issue makes no value statement on either knowledge system, it places them as parallel entities. Simply put that there no subjugation of western knowledge for it is a rigorous and robust knowledge system as is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge system. Importantly there is also no alliance between either knowledge system for that contorts the argument for primacy and inadvertently creates obtuse power relationships. Therefore by claiming the notion of primacy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island knowledge systems there exists, the strongest planks for progressing Indigenous intellectual self determination.

The journey

It was in the WINHEC Journal of 2010 that the journey had started however at the time of print was yet to be determined. Addressing the challenge to academic freedom was achieved through position papers that defended Indigenous Knowledge Systems and their points of differentiation pervious by those of critical minds that were able to subjugate and deconstruct their own knowledge system. By the very virtue of the notion of epistemology if researching an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander topic you are obliged to step out of one and into another albeit your epistemological claim can at best be considered fifty per cent. It was these very arguments that were launched and navigated through university mechanisms leading up to a presentation to the full academic board on May 11th, 2010.

The journey however was only made possible by the by the wisdom and tenacity of Victorian Elders and Respected Persons / Knowledgeable Others who were involved in providing the vision, words and encouragement to the staff of the Institute to progress their arguments through the University channels. The three Aboriginal professors Brabham, Arbon and Rose did not stand alone before the assembled professoriate at academic board for behind were spirit and the grit of their ancestors and the Victorian Elders and Respected Persons / Knowledgeable Others who had

marshalled their cultural and ancestral authority to stand firm on this matter. Their collective Eldership provided clear and distinct directions for 'working with a new agenda' in research.

At academic board on May 11th, 2010 the Vice Chancellor at the time Sally Walker stood in respect and following questions the academic board chair Professor Joe Graffam complimented the presentation and gave two months for further deliberations and feedback. None were received however informal discussion was rife and at the meeting of Academic Board, 14th September, 2010, the plan was formally ratified.

This ratification of the *Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan* and endorsement of the primacy of Indigenous knowledge ushered a new era in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and research on the Australian education landscape

Dog chasing a car

Progressing an agenda of Indigenous advantage is never easy within the monolithic Western academy. With the appointment of two Chairs for Indigenous Knowledge Systems to build on to its already established research profile the Institute has progressively moved towards the elevation of Indigenous Knowledge as a legitimate knowledge system within the academy. This task however was brought into contention when the former Vice Chancellor Sally Walker queried dimensions of the Institute's research plan. Vice Chancellor Sally Walker who while regarded as a supporter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education as a consummate academic leader sought to ask the critical question that a Vice Chancellor as defender of the gates should ask which she did so courageously without fear or favour. The question was: How does this impact Academic Freedom? This created an opportunity to prosecute at the highest level of university academic governance the proposition of Indigenous Knowledge systems. It was therefore with great tribulation that at a gathering of Elders and Respected Persons / Knowledgeable Others at the Institute's 'research hotspot' that the Director of the Institute was able to announce that Deakin University's Academic Board ruling was in the positive.

This was a defining moment for the Elders and Respected Persons / Knowledgeable Others many of whom have a lifetime in the pursuit of such issues. Their humbleness in victory was seminal and with barely enough time for celebration and consistent with their great wisdom they posed the question with great symbolic eloquence;

".... we have been like a dog chasing a car, have we ever thought what the dog would do with the car if it was caught".

Having *'caught the car'* and being the first university to endorse the arguments surrounding the validity of Indigenous Knowledges places us at the edge of a precipice laden with huge responsibilities and infinite possibilities – as we face the dawn of a new era and a new agenda in Community Empowered Research.

A new era and a new agenda in community empowered research

The acceptance by Deakin University's Academic Board of the *Institute of*

Koorie Education Research Plan carries with it multiple challenges both for the Institute, for the broader university and for communities. The challenges for all actually reduce to the clear call from the Elders and Respected Persons / Knowledgeable Others for 'honest' research. The tipping point that ignited the call for review by senior university personnel was triggered around the CRIP (Cultural Research Integrity Protocols) which was seen as impeding 'academic freedom'. Around the table at all the 'research hotspots' were stories by the Elders and Respected Persons / Knowledgeable Others of research abuse and exploitation. Certainly the years of lobbying on the issue had been instrumental in raising the standard in contemporary ethical mandated compliance such as the National Ethics Application Form[1] (NEAF); however it was considered that even these didn't capture the fundamental differences between knowledge systems.

The core point of differentiation revolved around the fact that western knowledge

[1]   www.neaf.com.au

systems were essentially transactional and as such shuns relationship that could contaminate the objectivity of the knowledge transfer. On the other hand Indigenous knowledge transfer is predicated on relationship and therefore any knowledge exchange that is not linked to a relationship is to be cautioned and may restrict the flow of information. In order to leverage the best and in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander terms the most ethical and meaningful exchange when dealing with a topic that involves Indigenous matters the Cultural Research Integrity Protocols (CRIP) honours such relationship and this is central to the *Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan* that gained carriage through academic board.

CRIP obviously calls for adherence to National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) (2007)), NEAF and AIATSIS (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (2000)) documents however it also requires compliance around issues that define the quality of the research relationship such as evidence of;

Inclusion of Statewide Organisations in involvement and engagement.

Local negotiation

Evidence of authentic community involvement and engagement

Statement of value

Statement of reimbursement or investment by community

Residual relationship with community

A unique feature of the CRIP is that it calls for all research including desktop and commercial research some of which falls outside the domain of NHMRC, NEAF and AIATSIS compliance to be evaluated.

The Institute of Koorie Education is highly aware of the numerous levels of work now required in research, supervision and other areas. Notably in the research field the Institute of Koorie Education at Deakin University does not wish to nor does it have the capacity to mobilise a policing action in order to ensure compliance. What it does want to do is to influence the research culture in order to gain higher standards of research particularly

one that benefits Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people including communities in surfacing, affirming and securing Indigenous knowledge and assist communities in 'knowledge based' solutions. In order to achieve this over 2011 and 2012 the Institute of Koorie Education in collaboration with the Deakin Research Office will therefore create two products that will operationally progress the spirit and intent of CRIP. One product being an 'on-line' training package for all those proposing Indigenous research at Deakin University and the other being a register of all research undertaken at Deakin University involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The proposed CRIP training package is in its infancy however forward plans predict a platform whereby the user views and reads selected material that relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research. Following this the computer generates eight to ten randomly selected questions from a bank of questions and on successful completion the applicant will receive a CRIP registration number.

The material and questions will be approved by Elders and Respected Persons / Knowledgeable Others as is the principle and ethos at the Institute.

Similarly the CRIP register will be created in tandem with the Elders and Respected Persons / Knowledgeable Others. The register will list on a university web site all relevant details of and research activity that they are undertaking that includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people undertaking research. This declaration will list principles central to the community empowered research agenda and will be accessible by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations.

The two projects are deemed the best way to operationally initiate the CRIP as a tool to influence the research culture at Deakin and beyond and to protect and secure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges.

Conclusion

This paper progresses discussion on the ratification of the *Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan—working with a New Agenda in Community Empowered Research* while outlining the elevation of Indigenous Knowledge systems through the unwavering cultural authority of the Elders and Respected Persons / Knowledgeable Others and the negotiations of the three Aboriginal professors Brabham, Arbon and Rose, as it begins to outline the next phase of required focussed and responsible work within the broad area of research.

References

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Appendix One:

Deakin University Academic Board Deliberation

Items for consideration or approval, Aboriginal validity

To recall that at Meeting 3 of the Academic Board, held on 11 May 2010, the Academic Board received a presentation from the Director of the Institute of Koorie Education and the professors for Indigenous Knowledge Systems. The presentation was on the Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan—Working with a New Agenda in Community Empowered Research (Doc AB2010/03/46) which outlines a cultural research integrity protocol. Also tabled was an attachment to the plan entitled Aboriginal Knowledge Validity (Doc AB2010/03/45). After a full and robust discussion, the Academic Board made a commitment to revisit the matter at a meeting in the near future for endorsement. To note that the main assertions of the cultural research integrity protocol are that Indigenous knowledge systems claim primacy with western and other knowledge systems. All research (including desktop and empirical) involving Aboriginal culture, people, and communities will benefit from collaboration and negotiation with Indigenous experts within and external to the University. To approve the recommendation:

that the Academic Board endorse the Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan—Working with a New Agenda in Community Empowered Research(Doc AB2010/03/46), which outlines the cultural research integrity protocol, as a guide to researchers conducting or intending to conduct research pertaining to Aboriginal people, communities and/or culture.

that the Plan be located on the University's Research website so that researchers have access to the protocol as a guide.

Appendix Two:

Institute of Koorie Education Research Plan—working with a new agenda in community empowered research

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 both 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 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 the University to recognise firstly the significant work that the Institute of Koorie Education has made in teaching, learning and research over two decades as well as with community endorsement set 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 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 collaboration 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 community based delivery modes.

2.   Working 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 to critical questions/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, Brabham, Henry 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 2008-2012 will focus such growth by dovetailing into Deakin

University's goals, strategies and 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 on our responsibility to ensure not only the integrity of our work but the research capacity of the broader university. Therefore Cultural Research Integrity Protocol (CRIP) will be a strategy that looks beyond baseline University Ethics to preserve the cultural integrity of the project at the same time protects 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 along following principles:-

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

Aim	Methods	Measured
Enhance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge capacity through higher degree programs by community based delivery modes.	Promoting, attracting, supporting and supervising through to completion Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Masters and PhD programs.	Growth rate of formal enrolments and completions.
	Workshop promotion to honours students.	Number of workshops held.
	Conducting in communities' research incubation workshops.	Number of workshops held.
Working closely and with respect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in projects that surface, affirm, apply and secure Indigenous Knowledge.	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.	Number of community engagements held.
		Number of workshops on research and ethics.
	Working predominantly with and directed by the community produce knowledge collaborations in various media formats that further Indigenous Knowledge Systems.	Number of written and other collaborations produced.
		Number of invited speaking engagements.
Number of research activities completed.	Facilitate community-based solutions to critical questions/issues in partnership with individuals, communities and community organisations through research.	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.
	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.	Number of community engagements held.