Australian Indigenous Studies Practitioner’s Forum

2013: ‘Same but Different: Indigeneity and Diversity in the Corporate University’ – a practical forum for people working within Indigenous Studies, developing Indigenous content or working with Indigenous Australian students.

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SAME BUT DIFFERENT
Indigeneity and Diversity in the Corporate University

Edited by Philip Morrissey

Aboriginal Humanities Project
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AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS STUDIES AS A SIGN OF CONTRADICTION

Philip Morrissey

Some Propositions for Practice Theory

Firstly I want to pay my respects to the traditional owners, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and their great elders, past and present. This is the third time we’ve had a practitioners’ forum and we’re shifting gears a little bit. We’re actually going to mediate it with a publication and what I would like you all to do today, of course, is to attend our sessions, contribute and be part of the intellectual input into that publication. We want to circulate it as widely as possible. On many occasions Indigenous people come together and decide things and nothing happens. We have a great time and go away, so how do you mediate the outcomes and make a contribution to an ongoing debate.

I would acknowledge there is no unified field that can be called Australian Indigenous Studies – but socially and professionally it’s good for people who are engaged with the various strands that make up Australian Indigenous studies to come together in solidarity. We are a teaching and learning community of students, lecturers, and tutors working to produce an enriched experience for everyone. Teaching is founded on content and specifically the mastery of content. Teaching is a relationship between student and teachers and relationships have histories, contexts, personal variables.

This colloquium is oppositional in some ways, the idea initially occurred in response to a more conventional teaching and learning forum where I was annoyed and disappointed at what I saw as fantasy responses\(^1\) to the critical problem of Indigenous access to, and success in, higher education. (In the face of those sorts of events I’ve facetiously suggested we have Worst Practice Awards where we talk about how we failed and what we learned as a result.)

\(^1\) This is not to say that those responses aren’t well-meaning.
So we wanted something which actually tried to address real issues and involve real change. The thing about us all is of course we are experts without realising it. Even if you find what you know doesn’t work at least you know something; to actually have tried something and failed is knowledge. It is not knowledge to promote a wish-fulfilling fantasy. It is not knowledge to seek to intervene and engage in teaching Indigenous people or teaching Indigenous studies without ever having taught yourself. This seems an obvious point but one that still has to be made. How many flying (that is, teaching) hours do you have? Have you taught when you’re ill? Getting a divorce? Have an ongoing medical condition? It follows from this that we will always have to make decisions in short time frames with imperfect knowledge, deliver in less than ideal circumstances. What we accrue over the course of a semester of teaching is reality-based knowledge. To actively use this knowledge to think about the challenges we encounter and to use those outcomes to improve teaching and then start the process again is to engage in practice theory.

We’ve got a pretty intense program today. Everyone we’ve invited, I would say, they are all individuals; none of them has been created by non-Indigenous people. They come with histories of active engagement with institutions, successes and failures, and they will share that knowledge with us today.

Value Driven

In Reading the Country there is a black and white photograph of Paddy Roe and underneath a sentence: ‘You are looking at Paddy Roe while he is glancing to his left. Will your gazes ever meet? If they do will you recognise each other? Will this recognition be based on sameness or difference?’

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A critical thing we, as Aboriginal people, face in the contemporary university is one of control over the institutional use of sameness and difference, that is the specificity of our Aboriginality balanced against our shared rights and responsibilities as workers and students. Though we are oppositional, and people who contest and contribute through debate and critique, we still need a vision of the future, and we certainly need a structural analysis of policy, a sense of future directions, of where things are going. How do we do things more effectively? How do we live out our varied human potentials? We spend our lives in corporations, how do we have a meaningful life within them? What I’m going to do today is talk about ethics and values, taking in the main as my inspiration the late Nyigina elder Paddy Roe as well as drawing on other aspects of the Aboriginal tradition.

One of the things that has always defined Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne is that it is a value-driven program. That may sound a little enigmatic but the concept has a history and you may be surprised to learn that I heard it used for the first time by John Avery, New South Wales Police Commissioner in the 1980s. I was living in Sydney then, and there’d been ongoing problems with the New South Wales Police Force. When Avery was appointed as the Commissioner he instituted a number of reforms, including reconfiguring the NSW Police Force as a value-driven Police Service.\(^3\) For any organisation having values inevitably means that it will experience moments of contradiction. For the Police Service it meant in practice that some things the communities might desire, or the agendas of politicians, could be inimical to those values. An instance here might be an upper-middle-class suburb where the residents would prefer that the police move on people deemed by appearance, or race, to be undesirable. Similarly politicians might find it in their political interests to have greater or lesser rates of arrest for certain crimes. By extension one can see that having values in the contemporary university inevitably means that there will be

\(^3\) The change of name from Force to Service is noteworthy. It has since been renamed the NSW Police Force. See John Avery, *Police, force or service?* Sydney: Butterworths, 1981.
moments of contradiction, resolved through conflict, compromise, or negotiation. That in itself should be recognised as a valuable contribution to institutional health.

*Things Must Go Both Ways*

So, a value-driven program: it was just a phrase for a number of years but has become important as we’ve had to respond to changing managerial agendas as well intellectual fashions. The ethics modelled in Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe’s *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley* and Benterrark, Muecke and Roe’s *Reading the Country: An Introduction to Nomadology* have been foundational in forming our Australian Indigenous Studies program.

I realised with Paddy Roe that a lot of what he stood for was an ethical philosophy encapsulated in the phrase, ‘Things must go both ways.’ Stephen Muecke relates his first meeting with Paddy Roe: ‘It was our first meeting and I wanted him to work with me, a first year student recording oral narratives. …When I asked him to tell me a few stories he responded by saying, “Things must go both ways.” When I ask what he meant he laughed and asked if I could start by loading the corrugated iron on the truck.’ This becomes the basis of a teaching and learning relationship. In comparison, Muecke noted in *Reading the Country* that (at that time) the only reference to Paddy Roe found in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies’ library was for *Gularabulu*, notwithstanding the fact that academics from various disciplines and public servants had collected and circulated his knowledge under their own names.

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At its simplest, the concept is about equivalent exchange: our students are our clients and they pay money for teaching in exchange, that’s a very basic relationship. In reality it is something much more organic where there’s an interchange and development on both sides – for the teacher and the student. It’s a dynamic relationship. It means openness to the possibility of a reinvention of the self, a rethinking of what we do. It’s not against valid hierarchies. But it says those hierarchies should be organic, they shouldn’t ossify and become points where the organisation works less effectively, where diversity is corralled, contained, fetishised.

In a reciprocal community everyone should serve and be served. What does that mean? In some case it’s straightforward. For instance, in a work team that meets regularly, everyone takes a turn at making the coffee and tea, and/or cleaning up and washing cups, irrespective of seniority or gender politics. Reciprocity produces stability and a higher-order mode of communication. But ‘things must go both ways’ should also be dynamic. Like the yin/yang symbol, predicated on mutuality and in which each half contains the seeds of its opposite, we need the openness to a continual disclosure of new possibilities. In the following I’ll discuss what I believe are some of the elements of the precept ‘Things must go both ways’ and their practical application.

As an example as to how this might work, consider that at the most junior level the employee is completely open to scrutiny from each level above. This scrutiny is strictly downwards – imperatives and demands senior employees are subject to become increasingly opaque at more senior levels. An ethical working relationship might require that no-one with management responsibility should have Key Performance Indicators that are private. All university staff would know what their agendas are. Further, no-one would receive performance bonuses for anything unless it was open to public scrutiny. Without this transparency such bonuses are the moral equivalent of secret commissions.
Respect

If reciprocity is based on exchange, respect is an enabling factor. It allows us to learn, to be open to learning what we don’t know. To be disrespectful is to close ourselves down; you have to keep working it out in your own professional life. With our own practice we urge students to attend lectures out of respect for lecturers, particularly Aboriginal lecturers, and members of the community that come in and lecture. Earlier this year [2013], Warwick Thornton spoke to some of our students about his understanding of respect in relation to some of his elders. Respect in this context means that if you give something, demonstrate respect in a concrete way, they might give you something back in the form of knowledge. (And what they are rich in is experience and knowledge.) We accordingly need to foster meaningful respect, not just politeness. For universities policies on Indigenous issues should start with an understanding of respect rather than performative gestures.

Charity/Sympathy

Gularabulu contains the exquisite story ‘Yaam’. Yaam is a man who has become deranged as a result, it seems, of trauma. Having lost his people he believes that a mob of wild cattle that he travels with are his tribe. The story illustrates the understanding and equally importantly the sensitivity of Paddy and other Aboriginal stockmen when they encounter Yaam, and then years later, after Yaam had passed on, the respect with which they re-inter him when they find that his grave has been disturbed. The stockmen model a conception of the individual which is non-objectifying, transcending narrow economist conceptions of humanity.

If this is an example of sympathy we find examples of charity in Paddy Roe’s interactions, his accepting that people will make mistakes and when necessary correcting

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6 Australian Indigenous film director, screenwriter and cinematographer, director of *Samson and Delilah*, 2009.
gently. In one recorded instance he’s sitting with a friend Franz Hoogland, and in passing he’s talked about *liyan*, an intuitive faculty which is located in the solar plexus. Intrigued and interested, Franz says to Paddy, ‘How do I develop that *liyan*?’ Paddy looks down, pauses, his face veiled by his hat, he coughs gently and then he says, ‘That’s the hard one, we got to teach ’im.’ He doesn’t say, ‘You can’t ask in that way, you’re not in a position to ask that. Because you’ve asked that question I can’t teach you.’ He defers the question and a direct answer until the moment it might be asked in the appropriate manner, in the right context, and properly answered. In some ways this is the highest level of communication and teaching.

*Prudence*

One of Paddy Roe’s most difficult teaching concepts is that of prudence. It is still one I’m trying to understand, but we are looking at each of the elements of the philosophy of Paddy Roe, as we understand them, and as they relate to workplace practice. To be prudent, I think, is to be aware of what’s happening around you, sometimes avoiding conflict in order to conserve energy and maintain focus on the essential. Discussing the intuitive faculty *liyan* with Franz Hoogland, Paddy Roe gives an example of how walking through the bush it could manifest as an awareness that something was not right and a precautionary avoidance implemented: ‘Might be someone waiting with spear, we better go this way.’

In ‘Donkey Devil, Story II’ Paddy takes his spear and tomahawk when asked to investigate an apparently demonic creature even though he appears sceptical when told the story of the encounter with a strange creature. Here there is an awareness of possibilities implicit in his investigation, innocuous as it seems. Implementing prudence in the corporate workplace we try to consider events, and the consequences of actions, from multiple

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perspectives and keep in mind that there are aspects of people or situations that exceed our observations or experience. A heavier burden, but one in which prudence is a protective discipline for Aboriginal people, is the intention not to be provoked, not to act instinctively in the face of culturally disrespectful acts encountered in the workplace. Without prudence our whole project is jeopardised.

Community

While the corporate world works on a system of reward and punishment and the negative individualisation of its workers, Australian Indigenous Studies units can do the opposite by practising communal responsibility. Where there is a failure or a fault the whole system should be analysed, and that will take into account attitudes modelled by senior staff, peer group cultures as well as the individual responsibility.

An illustrative story I heard once involved a remote Aboriginal community where a non-Aboriginal visitor was found alone late at night with a young woman who was about to marry one of her own community. Nothing had happened but an immediate court was convened at which all community members were present. After violent and frightening expressions of anger a surprising change occurred after some time as individual community members rose and publicly held themselves to account for their role in creating the situation, in some case accusing themselves along the lines of ‘I’m her uncle and I should have taken better care of her’.

While we are talking about communities and community responsibility, one of the things that we do in ours is make it clear that we don’t blame people for failing or having problems, but the one mistake we take seriously is hiding a problem and not seek communal support or advice. We own the problem with the individual. Now that contradicts the system we’ve identified where people are individualised and given individual rewards and
punishments, dispersed and set against each other. In that system there can be no communal responsibility.

Protocols

If we believe people have inherent value how do we recognise this in corporations? Corporations can only acknowledge this as an abstraction. We need operative protocols and Aboriginal culture can provide models that can ‘civilise’ a corporation.

Now I want to extend this into the notion of what it might mean in terms of community. Whether we like it or not we live in communities. And for better or worse we are in the university community. I think for these purposes we should see community as not just a group of friends but rather a group of people who are brought together because they have some shared interest or purpose. With that comes the question, what can we learn from Aboriginal culture with respect to protocols? And once again I’d like these protocols to be seen as operative protocols. They provide guidance, allow us to behave in the most appropriate manner if we don’t have necessary social knowledge or are limited by our own psychology or personality. They can open up possibilities for communication as well as acknowledge and protect sensitivities. Protocols can make interactions less awkward and violent. They can deal with issues that are going to affect everyone. What if a colleague dies suddenly? How is that recognised? How are the feelings of the colleagues who may have been close to the deceased respected? When is it appropriate for someone to move into their office? Sit at their desk? When should their photographs and personal information be removed from web pages? Who will ensure that this happens? A corporation usually doesn’t have policies on any of this. It’s left up to the judgement and initiative of individuals and of course this where barbarisms occur. It’s really about manners, and if we’re looking at
Australian Indigenous studies one of the things that we should be trying to do is civilise the people we work with.

**Shame**

There are three ways this term was used in Aboriginal communities. First, someone might use it as a description of self-consciousness and social unease ‘I’m ashamed (or I’m ‘shame’).’ When Aboriginal and white people lived in separated communities, social interactions with white people could produce this feeling of unease. People might also feel it if undue prominence was given to them at the expense of family or community. The other sense is when it’s said directly to someone to ‘growl’ them, to express disapproval of their behaviour, ‘shame!’ . Similarly, it might be used in conversation to pass judgement on someone’s behaviour and to affirm accepted norms. The term ‘shame job’ might be used. (This judgement is often expressed in tones of mild amusement rather than censoriousness.) Both of these usages proceed on the assumption that someone is being rebuked because they are a member of a community; or that a judgement is being expressed because it involves a community member and intact social relationships and responsibilities.

The gravest use of the concept of shame is shame at someone’s shamelessness. In this instance, the person who uses it takes on the shame of the perpetrator. Mrs Ellen Draper in writing down the story of the Myall Creek Massacre for publication\(^8\) says that the story of the massacre had never been written down before by Aboriginal people because the shame of it prevented its re-telling outside the small Aboriginal circles in which it was traditionally told. The Aboriginal people who are the custodians of the story feel shame but the shame is for the behaviour of the massacre perpetrators. In this case the shameful act has not estranged the perpetrator from the community but rather from humanity. It’s a cautionary

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tale for the powerful, those who overturn accepted standards in pursuing their ends. This is shame as an absolute limit and this is the worst possible outcome for an organisation.

\textit{Justice}

Finally, an Aboriginal responsibility is the willingness to execute justice when necessary. Not everyone needs to execute this responsibility but it is a communal one. Now, I’ve talked of charity, sympathy in relation to people, and the acceptance of mistakes. In almost all instances failures and shortcomings should remain private, but sometimes private justice can mean public injustice. You have to make an offence public and seek justice and retribution publicly, not in the crude sense of shaming someone but because to learn from it, and prevent its recurrence, the offender and the offence need to be brought into independent, objective frameworks of power. In most instances this will be a legal one. Now there’s a famous legal case of a woman who bought a soft drink, a bottle of ginger beer, in Great Britain in the 1930’s and found a snail in it after she’d drunk from it (and later became ill).$^9$ No precedent existed at the time for such an action but it’s become of fundamental importance in protecting consumer rights.

Our challenge now is to think about Aboriginal justice - this means that we define first what constitutes wrongdoing. \textit{We} define it - not the corporate institution, nor the legal profession. We then, if the offence warrants it, must proceed to execute justice - a justice necessitated by the nature of the offence, not one determined by legal opinions on winnable cases, nor corporate grievance procedures.

$^9$ Donoghue vs. Stevenson (1932).
First, I would like to recognise the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to their elders both past and present and to all Indigenous and non-Indigenous people here today. My grandmother, mother and great-grandfather were all born on the Framlingham Aboriginal mission, 22 kms outside Warrnambool in southwest Victoria. My great-grandmother was born on Cummeragunja Mission at Barmah Forest outside of Shepparton. These are two really strong communities in terms of Aboriginal politics in this country, which many Aboriginal leaders in Victoria have come from. So I’m fiercely proud of my Aboriginality and the political struggle that my family has played. By community I mean both Indigenous and non-Indigenous community. My father migrated to Australia from Malta in the 60’s for all the reasons immigration occurs. Australia is such a great country. I won’t go into the differences that a lot of our communities, whether they’re migrant communities or Indigenous communities still face within Australia today, because that’s another discussion and I become very passionate about the disparity that too many communities are still faced with in such a rich migrant aspirational country.

Being a young Aboriginal boy it took me a long time to come to terms with how Indigenous communities are viewed in this country. I grew up with varied ideals on how my people should be represented, and for me it was through sport. Having said that, I’m frustrated that the only way blackfellas in this country get into mainstream lounge rooms is essentially through local footy or through sport more broadly. The roles that sports play in our country, the big nation
building moments, have been really significant. So while mine is clearly an AFL perspective, I would encourage you to consider a broader view. The one thing that I’ve learnt from my career in Aboriginal affairs as a community member and a professional person is that the principles for doing either role well are absolutely transferrable. However you look at it, the reality is that the principles around being successful in Aboriginal affairs do not shift. So what I’m going to discuss today is my view of what those principles should look like. Whatever people say, the reality is we can only tackle Indigenous issues by talking, discussing, arm-wrestling, hugging, crying, loving and fighting. That's the only way to resolve it. Unfortunately in this country that mindset has been diminished. Even if we begin with a shared aspiration of what success looks like in the Aboriginal community, if there is one degree of separation at the start it will only become bigger at the end. We must start at exactly the same place to reach a consensus.

I talk a lot about nation building moments and the role sport has played. The inaugural cricket team that left this country over 150 years ago was an all-Indigenous team. Tom Wills was the founder of Australian football and a fully integrated member of the Chaap Wuurong community. I’ve just come back from Ireland where the AFL took the decision earlier this year to take only the second all-Aboriginal side overseas to compete. The Aboriginal community basically said ‘what an unbelievable statement, what an unbelievable opportunity to take our culture, our people, through sport to an international country’. Not to play footy, that was the easy, although we didn’t do it all that well unfortunately. But it was more than that; it was a historically significant moment for this country. But what it did was split the community. The number of non-Aboriginal people who
said it was segregation and it was reverse racism, whatever that means, was astonishing. What it showed me is that Australian Aboriginal history is not Australian history in this country yet. What I’ve learnt through the AFL brand is that it gets you in the door really quickly. It opens up a whole other network, and the cultural conflict I have is who am I representing? Am I representing the rights and responsibilities of Aboriginal people or the rights and responsibilities of the AFL? And they’re two different answers in terms of the starting point. There is a diplomatic answer or there’s a political answer. So any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person who works between the two worlds would hopefully understand some of this conflict, mentally, emotionally, culturally, socially, politically and economically. We are forever wrestling ourselves.

Building the Value Proposition

This is a complex and dynamic space. Unless we challenge and contest each other in an authentic and legitimate manner, not in terms of belittling but in terms of wanting to move everybody’s aspiration forward, we don’t really achieve anything. I think being Indigenous in the corporate world, which is similar to any work environment, should be based on these three fundamental points. You need to build what they call in the corporate world the value proposition. If you said to me five or six years ago, what is the value proposition for the AFL Indigenous? I would have said what the hell are you talking about? I’ve continually checked myself and if I don’t my mother or my community has, and they say stop trying to sound like a big shot. Blackfellas are good for the AFL and the AFL is good for blackfellas, so the corporate jargon becomes value propositional. A part of our skill as community people is to learn to speak the language of the white man, that’s the reality. You don’t have to agree with it or
like it, but if you want to do your job and you believe in what you’re doing you will adopt the approach you need to. I was picked by the AFL as somebody that they thought could help grow the role of the AFL in the Aboriginal community. I realised quickly that there was a lot of wallpaper, a lot of symbolism, but when you scratch below the surface there is no substance.

The first thing is to be *legitimate* and *sustainable*. You need to legitimately answer the why, the what, the how and the when. Sometimes you won’t find an answer to one or two of those areas and that’s okay. Acknowledging we don’t have the answer yet is absolutely legitimate. However, strong answers to these questions are an important part of any business. Once you get through that then it’s about why do we do Indigenous and why is it important to our business?

What I found at the AFL was sort of a corporate social responsibility (CSR). In some respects there is a bit of indo-mining, what they call in the mining world a licence to operate. So what was the AFL’s licence to operate in the Aboriginal community, given that 2% of the population make up 10% of the clubs’ lists? If
you took out 10% of AFL players who are the best players and the most exciting players, including the corporate sponsorships and the broadcast deals they generate, the economic impact to the AFL is significant.

So why are we doing Indigenous? What does success look like, where do we want to be in five or ten years’ time? How and when are we going to do it? The amount of consultants our government will pay to investigate Indigenous claims is significant. We would be better off pooling that money and using it practically. The amount of Indigenous claims that are wasting time and money is ridiculous. I have become the Aboriginal bloke. Everything Aboriginal in the AFL comes to me. There is an issue so let Jason fix it. It wasn’t my issue; it was just an Aboriginal issue. I go and talk to this corporate about getting some funding and they’re interested in Indigenous and that may help us get the money over the line. It is ridiculous in terms of where the ownership for the portfolio sat. That is why the blackfellas in mainstream organisations walk. They burn out because they just cannot sustain the cultural responsibility from both the organisation and the community. The cultural load becomes such a burden that the easy thing to do is just find another job. That’s the reality of the world that I walked into at the AFL.

The second part is building a strategy through a considered framework. You really need to be clear on how you go about that. Ultimately being a community person, the obligation I feel is to work with the Aboriginal community. This takes many cups of tea, sit downs in the dirt and visits to people, which is a career in itself. Our communities are as good as anybody at creating bureaucracy. Sometimes we create the kind of bureaucracy that consumes organisations and people. Engage the community, sit down with the
mob, talk about hope, dreams and aspirations. You need to come up with some mutual goals and obligations that can move you through the next phase.

Partnership is really important to legitimate and sustain relationships in corporate, community or government networks. Think about who your mutual partners are!

One of the challenges mainstream organisations have in Aboriginal affairs is a thing called funding capture. We get some Aboriginal money if we do this. It is really not in our mission and really outside our scope of work, but we can get it. In the end it just distracts you and you start drifting in a different direction.

Before you know it the whole business is sitting over here because you have run off for some funding that is separate to what you should be doing.

Take the Richmond footy club for example in the AFL. AFL clubs exist to win premierships. The idea of doing business and doing good in the community are not mutually exclusive. You can do both and we are now better at doing both, but not great. So the notion that you cannot commercialise Indigenous is ridiculous. If you are not able to do that you should think about becoming a social welfare service. In an organisation like the University of Melbourne I’m sure that the struggle to balance the books is bloody tough. So how do you turn your Indigenous space not into a cost centre but into a profit centre? You can do it and legitimise your credibility in the community. But you have to be very clear about getting these steps right. The Richmond footy club wanted to have a $20 million facility redevelopment of Punt Road down there by the MCG. They were $8 million short, so through their business networks somebody rang Joe Hockey and he said there is $12 million sitting in an Indigenous education fund that we may not be able to spend. Mr Hockey suggested that if you initiate an Indigenous program then we’ll give you $7 million and that will finish off your development.
In short notice the money was in the bank. Now Richmond footy club is thinking how the hell are we going to account for this? We have one Aboriginal player and no relationship with the local Aboriginal community, so we better fly to Darwin and talk to somebody. Then the political machine starts and it took six months from my career, from my life, to negotiate a deal with the local mob, politicians and the club. In the end it took six months for Richmond to realise that what had happened was mission drift. They took a free kick but they didn’t realise the price they had to pay to actually get it. The decision to play AFL games in Darwin has not been successful from an on-field perspective for the Richmond footy club. Richmond learned a lot from this and they’ve split their business model so they’ve got a separate entity now. They’ve got the football club and they’ve built a whole community infrastructure that sits in there. It was a classic case of funding capture, and there are hundreds of examples like that. Disappointingly many programs get cut because people go into funding capture. People have the idea, we’ve got to get a program, we have 25 kids who do tertiary education and they need a mentoring program. Then they call on the government to provide the funding. However, this won’t work if we don’t build sustainability into our programs. So build your partnerships and develop capacity that is both black and white. If you are not building the capacity of the Aboriginal community to understand and embrace, it just does not work. Without this it becomes a culture of conflict rather than a culture of collaboration.

You need to provide leadership and coordination, and celebrate culture. One of the things the AFL has become really good at is celebrating the great things about the Aboriginal community. However you end up doing that, there’s enough activity that goes on in terms of things like reconciliation week and
NAIDOC week. Also organisations and institutions themselves have a broad range of activities. Importantly this provides a great engagement point for people who might want to be involved or are not sold yet. You know who they are. They are the people peeking around the corner, listening in, but not joining in. Invite them in, introduce them, this is Aunty, this is Uncle, tell them a story Aunty. Tell them how you left school as a young girl, had kids, had grandkids, raised them and then went back and got a university degree. So use the celebrating points as an opportunity to engage not only the community but the people who are in the business, who are thinking what is in it for me or for us. Because of the historical challenge, my culture not being our culture, we need to use an institution like the university to find those engagement points. Our education system needs to get the curriculum right at the start in terms of kindergartens, primary schools and secondary schools promoting an inclusive interpretation of Australian history, not the white man’s version. It might be a pain at the start because it’s awkward, it’s uneasy, but in the end we all grow up and mature with a collective history.

The third point, which is crucial, is how you can get buy in from other businesses in terms of their insight, expertise, leadership or budget. How do you build a model that any number of people across the organisation can buy into? It could be everything or just one particular thing a business can offer. It might just be the ability to influence, like influencing that person who has the relationship you need to help you engage with others. It is all about management, strategic relationships and being authentic. Ongoing monitoring is critical to ensure what you are doing is continually right. Things change, organisational and community priorities, budgets and people shift. Sometimes people that you’ve been working with move on to solve other issues. So while you had their ear for three months,
you might not be able to get it again for six months. In the last five years I averaged fifteen funerals a year in Victoria. And that’s not including the other ones I go to like state funerals and the like. Our communities are a burden. With all the statistics and reports we read, some of us are actually living those statistics whether directly or indirectly. So one of the things that can happen very quickly in our community is there is a light on the hill somewhere, a person of insight and respect, and every Aboriginal person within the community is going to that person for insight and support. While this is all well-intentioned, you end up carrying a burden when you become a bit of a voice and a face within the community. You become somebody who can help, and everyone wants your help. Especially the non-Aboriginal community, he can help us, go and get Jason to come in and be on our advisory committee. Get the Aunty to go and do it, she’s really well-respected, she’s our Aboriginal elder. We are also burdening young Aboriginals in this way, 15 and 16-year-old kids are being called leaders, while they are trying to find themselves. I speak to a lot of school kids about the role of a young man in the Australian community today. By and large these are Anglo kids from wealthy families. Many kids in the Australian community today are not sure what the role of a young man is anymore. For Aboriginal kids, this is exaggerated, because at 14 you are a young leader. I do not see any non-Aboriginal kids being pulled up by the ear saying ‘you’re a leader’. We should let these kids grow up. However, that means there is a demand for us to find more leadership in our communities. So monitor where you are going and continually evaluate the whole model. So whatever your model looks like, anticipate the leadership already within the model and that best suits it. Sometimes we have great ideas but the wrong leadership. You need to be able to identify that and
have the courage to evaluate it. So I challenge my team at work not to be spreadsheet managers, but to be people leaders. However, if you want that obligation you must be prepared to be evaluated by your peers and community. You have to formalise how you get evaluated in this space. We have lots of managers running around, but the last thing we need is to be managed. We need leadership and to be transparent and accountable. There is nothing wrong when dealing with Indigenous as a business fundamental in getting it wrong, so long as you have clear plans, understand where your weaknesses were, haven’t gone over your budget and have a really proactive solution to actually address that challenge. There is nothing wrong with accountability. So be really transparent and accountable. If you get that sort of framework right you will get to that end point and you will be comfortable identifying something you did not get right and then trying to fix it.

Symbolism and Substance

I think simplicity in what we do is really important. Let’s consider Figure 2 as a way to measure the symbolism and substance of Indigenous initiatives. In the Aboriginal space where do you rate yourself in this graph? Now it’s subjective but you get the Indigenous map right and this starts to help formulate a more objective view. This is not complicated, and you get immediate and transparent feedback when you do this to your community, the CEO of your organisation, a peer, a colleague or a report. After five or six people you will start to form a view on where you sit in this graph. So let’s consider a few things that might go in the symbolism bucket.
The AFL is the best in the business marketing Indigenous stuff. The only thing we ever used to speak of was 2.5% of the population make up 10% of our list. It was all by default, it was by accident, just because blackfellas are good at footy, it was sort of like, let us in. 30 years ago we couldn’t get in, 20 years ago we couldn’t get in. In 1993 I played for St Kilda, I was one of 11 Aboriginal players on an AFL list. Two clubs actively had a non-recruiting policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It’s been 30 years since we had an Aboriginal coach and Glen James is still probably the most famous umpire. The AFL is not successful in Indigenous; we are successful in marketing Indigenous. It’s a tough comment and I’m at the front of the line so when the arrow flies it hits me. That is all right because when you actually believe in something you are prepared to say what you are good at and equally what you are not good at. Much of the marketing is symbolic. I’m not saying though that symbolism is insignificant. The ‘dreamtime at the G’ is a really strong symbolic statement that has a lot of substance behind it. Aboriginal flag, it’s a symbol, Aboriginal poster, that’s a
symbol, Aboriginal brochure, that’s a symbol. The welcome to country is a very significant, symbolic statement if it’s legitimated with the right protocols that sit around it. You cannot do that all the time. But they are the really important statements, because at least it’s an attempt to say we know you are out there and we are doing what we can. Now what might we consider are things of substance?

For example, changing recruiting strategies is substantial and supportive. From an AFL perspective and I suspect in other institutions also, the biggest challenge in Aboriginal affairs is human resources (HR). The thing we’ve learnt in the AFL is to set standards, protocols and policies, and then things start to happen. It takes time, and ultimately you need local and those sorts of things. For example, the racial vilification policy was launched in 1995. This is a really strong policy with a strong educational program. Now it has been broadened to sexual orientation, gender and religion. The biggest challenge we have now is meeting community club demand. Clubs want people to come and talk to them about vilification. They want an expert who can educate them appropriately on the issue. That expert may not be an indigenous player, but the clubs sort of expect someone like Adam Goodes to come and lecture them on racism. Racism gets played out in a hundred different ways and we need experts who can educate people in the many ways it emerges.

Resources allocation is another critical substantial factor. Successful projects and strategies need funding, so money is a key issue. What does your investment or your resource allocation program look like over a period of time? How do you allocate resources to your priorities? You need to know your plan, program and who is working with you. The corporate world knocks on my door every second day. When they come to me and say we are doing all this great
stuff, we’ve got a reconciliation plan, I ask how much do you spend on
Indigenous? A problem though with the allocation of resources is that half of the
reconciliation action plan launches that the corporate world are doing, more is
spent on the launch than their Aboriginal program. Two of the biggest corporates
in the country spent more on the launch of their reconciliation plan than on their
Indigenous programs. To me that is symbolism not substance. Decision making
through negotiation is also an important matter of substance. Come to me with a
proposition and let’s negotiate. Don’t come and talk to me with an idea and walk
away thinking we have an agreement. The ability to negotiate outcomes is a
critical factor. Indigenous people have been talked to for 220 years, and that
hasn’t helped us. It might take you a little bit longer to get to where you want to
get to but it is a more authentic and legitimate way to do our business. We also
need people, Aboriginal people. A large amount of people in government and the
private sector work on Indigenous issues and many of them are non-Aboriginal.
Some of that is our obligation and that’s where Indigenous academics can really
help in terms of the educational institutions. The sad reality in our country is that
there are more jobs for blackfellas then blackfellas willing or able to do them. So
my community have an obligation to take all the services, all the support and all
the educational mechanisms available to skill ourselves and discipline ourselves
to go and pursue those opportunities.

At the AFL we have well-defined development strategies. Think of the
mainstream arm of the AFL: CEO, general manager, physio, coach, player,
timekeeper and so on. All of our programs are designed to engage people at their
aspirational level and build their capability and understanding. I have had people
come to me and say they want to be an AFL coach. You want to work 100 hours
a week. No, because I have got community responsibilities. Well brother, you cannot do it. I’ve been an AFL coach working 100 hours a week, and it is hard, very hard. The reason I went into the AFL was because I didn’t see kids, I lost that connection with my community. All the things that made me a person I didn’t have anymore. I couldn’t go to festivals, I couldn’t go to community meetings, I couldn’t sit in political discussions because I’m a footy coach and that’s it. That was a pretty lonely existence when you’re from my background. So all of our programs are designed as an entry point and once you reach a certain capability then that triggers you into the mainstream. Once you are in then you have cultural support and mentoring. We have a really strong live protocol that Aboriginal people understand. Our evidence is now telling us indisputably that the resilience and capability to stay in the mainstream of people who come through our transition point outstrips those who just come in at another point. My advice is, if you’re an Aboriginal person with the capability, the resilience and the skills to go straight in, then go for it brother, sister. You are the epitome of what we are trying to do in our community. Ultimately it’s about harnessing their experience, expertise and coping skills back into our programs. That has happened a couple of times for us, which was unbelievably powerful. So I’m very cautious of not having to use the Aboriginal funnel to get in. It is an unhealthy expectation on us. So we are building, we have an Indigenous coaches academy that is managed by the AFL Coaches Association. I had a meeting yesterday about the coaches with the umpires association building the same concept. We launched a female kick-start program earlier this year aligned with our female strategy.
Try to find out what the University spends its money on, then say okay where can we procure Aboriginal business to help us do this? For example, there is an Aboriginal catering business doing really well, Charcoal Lane. Mission Australia has Aboriginal kids doing traineeships. So we spend X amount per year on Aboriginal businesses, which is a great outcome for the Aboriginal community. Welcome to Country is another procurement opportunity, whether its $250 or $2500 it’s a golden opportunity and you should count that. You should have those measures, and it is a success for us because I’m spending a million dollars a year on Aboriginal communities. What are your business needs and demands? So, think about where you sit on this graph? The AFL used to sit above the line on symbolism, but was pretty skinny on substance. We have now reoriented to improve our substance rating.

All this takes time. Unfortunately Aboriginal affairs are an incremental business. We’ve been trying to get this right for 220 years, socially, politically, culturally, economically and we are by no means where we want to be. So it’s an incremental business and we are all just sorting out what sort of footprint we want to leave on this business. I call Indigenous affairs a business deliberately. Last year the federal government invested 42 billion dollars in Aboriginal affairs. This is an international disgrace on any measure in any discussion, that our first peoples have that sort of money invested, spent, wasted, whatever term you want to use, and we still have the situation that we have. That was only last year. If you times that by 10 and take CPI off it, it is a lot of money. Money is not the issue, it’s what we are all asking for and what we all think we need, but it is not the issue.
Aboriginal business is full of managers and I don’t say that in a disparaging way. There are a few leaders that emerge and shift that needle incrementally. One of the downsides of being an Aboriginal person is we often pull ourselves down. No, I’m not going to let you become good, come back here. We are not meant to be good, isn’t that what Aboriginal people and whitefellas have taught us? We are meant to be mad, bad and sad. That is how we live in this country and why we get all those services that don’t work for us. We’ve got all those nice non-Aboriginal people who want to do things for us. But the only thing that will fix this in a business, communal and political sense is leadership. Because we have been suppressed as a community, that is the Australian community, in having any real discussion and conversation, we don’t actually get to the heart of the problem. Bureaucracy smothers us.

So hopefully that gives you some idea of an approach that I know works. For the first 15 years of my life I was a young Aboriginal person growing up in a community, sitting around my nannas, great uncles or grandfather’s family lounge rooms, kitchens and verandas, listening to this and I never thought in my wildest dreams I would be standing here, at age 40, talking about the same stuff in a corporate sense. But that is all I’m doing, I’m just corporatising the language. Our mob have been talking like this for years, hundreds of years, 40,000 years our people have been talking about how do we survive and thrive as a communal people. Then this other thing called settlement happened. It is what it is. If we have the right leadership we will all become stronger for it, and when I say all I mean the Australian community. I have no doubt this resonates with what Indigenous academics are doing and what other people are doing in Aboriginal
affairs. You can do business and community together, they are not mutually exclusive.

**Management is Necessary and Leadership is Essential.**

*Response from Heidi Norman*

You have suggested that considerable change can be achieved through sport. The model of change can be based on business models and described in terms of corporate language. The idea that we cannot commercialise Indigenous is crazy. Another interesting point was that the AFL is not necessarily successful at doing Indigenous, but good at marketing Indigenous. We now have a whole new language around mission drift and funding capture that will be useful. However, this is a challenge for people in higher education who do not often deal with bureaucracy beyond what they have to. We are more in the business of knowledge and ideas. Yet there is a corporatism that has gripped universities. Your way of using corporatism or corporatisation in terms of the language of business presents a challenge, but at the same time it is interesting that you think this business model can capture community development, encourage the mobility of individuals and can make a significant contribution in terms of wider social change and transformation.

*Question*

The model you discuss would need to be continually enriched so that people do not slip back to those negative stereotypes that cause imbalance, is there a way to do that, like regular staff training?

*Jason*

No, we have probably geared deliberately away from doing formal cultural awareness training. I think the best vehicles we have in this respect are our
programs. We engage 1000 15-year-old boys a year, and we engage 500 girls, this is in a dedicated program. The majority of our work, about 80%, happens at community level and focuses on education, health, employment, capacity building and aspiration. The stuff you see on the TV is the outcome of these programs. We have a number of significant and legitimate communities where our staff go and live in those programs for a few days. So these programs are used as a vehicle for cultural and personal development, rather than sit people in the classroom and go okay, this is an Aboriginal issue. We do this because to me it is a more effective educational program to have 500 Aboriginal boys in a region for a week with non-Aboriginal staff sitting down realising the colours and shades of Aboriginality in terms of connectedness, story, custom and tradition. So we use our development programs as a vehicle to do that and have a formula that we will put key management through that process every year.

Question

Your strategy is really visible and you use the capitalist language of corporation, which I think could be employed within the universities, particularly Indigenous Studies, and the way we run our business.

Jason

I could discuss this in different ways. If I was talking to a community mob I could do the same thing but change the terminology, shift the language. I am sure that if we discussed this for a few hours, you guys would put the university lens on this and only need to shift it a little to suit the university context. I do believe this is the right framework to work with, but the language and other aspects will shift. I had a meeting with the Aboriginal New South Wales land council the other day, who are a business but provide a great community benefit. The work that they do
deals with the community versus the international investment funds they work with. They have established a $780 million cash reserve, a billion dollars’ worth of infrastructure and two million dollars’ worth of contracts, but they still help the local mob earn $500 to buy a lawnmower and mow the high grass. They have done the depth and the heights really well, different business model to mine, to yours, but the principles around how they have done it shifted only marginally.

*Question*

If you say the AFL are not so successful at Indigenous, but good at marketing Indigenous, do you think that overall they enjoy the benefit?

*Jason*

Six years ago I found the AFL high in symbolism. We did not do Indigenous well at this time because a lot of our weighting was towards the right hand side of that graph. What we have done in the last six years is increase our investments in our people, reach and partnerships. We have lifted our performance in all those critical aspects discussed above. Now I would say we do Indigenous well, not good, and not great, but better than we have. Compared to the NRL, they are where we were six or eight years ago. I think they are at the start of the chain and have only just started employing Aboriginal people. If you do not get it right you end up with non-Aboriginal bureaucrats making decisions for Aboriginal communities. I cannot see how that would have any substance to it. Admitting what you don’t know is a big step forward. Once people begin to understand that there are things they do not know, alternatives, and other possibilities you start to see this shift in attitude and mindset within an organisation. I think the NRL have just started this journey.

*Question*
You obviously cop a lot of grief for being on the frontiers, and you talked about safety. How do you cope with that?

Jason

I wrote an article in *The Australian* four or five years ago that had great exposure. Chris Mitchell, the editor for *The Australian*, asked me to write it. I stressed to him that I would, but only if it was unedited and what I wanted to write about. I have found that you must make a decision as to whether you want to continually carry the burden and the load to achieve what I think is achievable. We are a sporting mad country. It is one thing we can agree or disagree on, you are either for or against it. The whole country celebrated when Lionel Rose became a world champion in 1968. He had a Beatles-like reception in the city from all Australians, both black and white. Just remind yourself of what role Lionel Rose played in building a nation. His father was born in an Aboriginal mission and buried there and my nanna had a role in helping him grow up. He united a nation through sport. Cathy Freeman carried a nation on her shoulders and ran 400 metres to win a gold medal in Sydney. Nelson Mandela used the world cup in 1995 to bring a divided country together. He used sport as a vehicle to take the first step in their reconciliation process. While politically driven reconciliation and reform programs were dividing people, sport was bringing them together. If you think of all those significant things, the people who endure it, whether they are executives or sports people, you have to learn the coping and resilience skills to survive it because it is tough. It is really difficult and any Aboriginal person would understand what my article was about. It was what I called ‘stuck in the middle syndrome’. Who do I have to be like? Am I the blackfella who wants to grab my spear and fix this stuff up now, or am I the AFL representative who has
to be diplomatic, political and strategic about stuff that I could fix with my shield and spear. A lot of the time you end up being a blackfella and a whitefella of the world. You become very confused at times as to who you are and what you represent. And that is why putting our feet back on our own journey is so important. A lot of cultural leave and cultural affirmation around HR is really important. I go to 15 funerals a year, there’s two thirds of my annual leave. I want the cultural leave I deserve. In the end you’ve got to create some safety nets. So my country is a safety net for me. Running around the bush, sitting next to the river or just re-imagining the way my community was, is a big safety net. I think as an Aboriginal person you become very good at re-imagining things. Sometimes your biggest opposition lives in your community. I am fortunate because I have always been independent enough not to get caught up in the community politics to the degree where you cannot come to this or that house. A lot of people don’t necessarily have that; they get consumed for whatever reason. I don’t burden our young people with leadership, let them climb trees.

The people who love you the most make the best mentors. You get to a stage in your life where discipline is love. One person is kicking you up the arse, but your people are hugging you and walking you through what you did wrong and how to get it right the next time. As young Aboriginal men and as Aboriginal people, we have lost the art of loving each other openly. If I walked over to Clint and gave him a hug he wouldn’t know what to do, because we have lost the art of loving each other as a community. So love in the whole community is important. I am a warrior over this side with my shield and my spear, but that does not mean you have to knock everybody down. People are inspired by positivity, not negativity. Think about your own life, are the people you want to be with and
follow positive, reaffirming and aspirational sort of people? Or are they that person who is looking around the corner all the time? I think there is a gene in humans that gives us an urge to look for leadership and love. It has only been in the last 5 years that I have been able to tell other men, my mates, my mentors, Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals that I love them without feeling awkward. Two of my best mentors have been older non-Aboriginal men. I get drawn to older people. I have always been a young person who hangs out with older people, in business, politics, religion and custom. I love young people and hanging out with kids, because they teach me a lot about myself. They teach me about challenges and troubles young Aboriginal people are having; things that I didn’t know about. The issues that young kids have to contend with now, just through technology alone, are different to those of my world. My three teenage daughters are the greatest mentors in my life. Ultimately I think you find your own people, and if you do not but the love is strong enough, they will find you. Hopefully you find somebody along the way who believes in you enough to grab you by the ear and go no, no mate, you are not going there you are going to come this way, because I know what is over there. You look back and you go, yeah, that was the moment, like my nanna telling me who to hang around with. She did not say stop hanging around them. She said if you want to get to where you want to get to you have to make a decision on who you hang around with. At 12 years old you have no idea what that means. You do not realise Nanna is telling you that those two boys who sneak out at night are not young fellas you want to hang around with. At 15 I realised what she was saying. And I know where my life is and I know where theirs is. That is just somebody who loves me giving me advice.
ON THE FRONTLINE: TEACHING INDIGENOUS STUDIES

Chelsea Bond

My input into this discussion must also be a story from my perspective as an Indigenous academic entering into the space that is the University of Queensland. Ian Anderson has written that an Aboriginal protocol often links our right to tell story by explaining our relationship to that story. In that vein, I’ve got to begin with myself, where I come from. I’m the youngest of four kids. I have a white mother who is a seventh generation white Australian of English/Irish heritage, and an Aboriginal and South Sea Islander father, who is Mununjali, from Beaudesert, but born and raised in other country. The Williams family is Mununjali, and Bond is my married name. But the name I grew up with is Watego, which denotes my South Sea Islander heritage. I’ve got family on that side around Northern New South Wales and far North Queensland. That’s my mob. I’m married, I’m a mother of five, and my kids, husband and myself live in an outer western suburb of Brisbane called Inala which is home to a very proud Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. I have come into Indigenous Studies from an Indigenous health background. I have worked as a health worker and a health researcher in the government and university sectors. In my role in Indigenous health, my main interest was around health promotion and community development, rather than in clinical health service delivery. Although I did play a part in those spaces, I was really interested in health in a much broader sense. Coming into Indigenous Studies it felt a bit like home. I was less on the margins there than I was when I was working within health.

There is a photo of me being awarded an academic medal at University of Queensland for my honours work, and Mum and Dad with me, and I like this
photo only because there’s a kind of surprised look on our face. Mum knew it was important, she sewed herself a new top and sewed Dad a flash new vest for the occasion, especially. I love the photo because my father is peering over at this little gold thing as if to say ‘what the hell is this all about?’. Growing up in my house, we grew up working poor and with a strong work ethic, but the expectation was that you would, after high school, go into a fulltime job that you were working at part time while you were in high school. The imagination of my parents was that I would be a fulltime checkout chick. I say that not to be disrespectful to those that are fulltime checkout chicks, for us there was great dignity and pride in occupying that role; more to demonstrate that while it’s exciting that we’re coming into these spaces, there’s still a sense of bewilderment, a sense of uncertainty about whether we belong here. University was certainly beyond our household imagination when I was young.

I think that we would all agree it is potentially an exciting time for Indigenous Studies and Indigenous academics, in terms of the push to Indigenise our institutions. But it is also an uneasy time. I’ve just this year come to an Indigenous unit and begun teaching into Indigenous Studies specifically, though I’ve taught in other discipline areas around Indigenous knowledge and systems less formally. I want to problematise my position in this space, and do it in a respectful way. I am conscious that I’m a beneficiary of the efforts of the people that have gone before me to open the doors to get us into these places. I don’t want to be disrespectful to their agendas and that cause. I have to acknowledge that I’m still a bub in this space, in some areas professionally and some areas culturally. Being the youngest of four kids I was always taught ‘know your place, know your place’. It’s from that position of bub that I don’t want to be
disrespectful. I know there are people sitting here that have fought this fight well before I came along and have engaged in far more substantial battles than me at this point in my career. It is really important that as I go along in this I continue to remember who I am and where I come from and how that affects my engagement.

I'll refer to a quote here from Taiaiake Alfred who says:

contrary to what is sometimes naively assumed by us and propagated by universities themselves, universities are not safe ground. In fact, they are not even so special or different in any meaningful way from other institutions; they are microcosms of the larger societal struggle. But they are the places where we as academics work - they are our sites of colonialism. And, they are our responsibility.¹⁰

I want to look at the university space as an Indigenous academic thinking of it as my site of colonialism. I'll start with the university that I studied at and that I’m now working at, the University of Queensland. University of Queensland is one of the top eight, and we don't enjoy a great reputation when it comes to the recruitment of Indigenous students and staff. This is confusing given their reputation for being supposedly so good in so many other areas of education. As I walk around the University of Queensland I don’t see a lot of people like me, whether they’re students or staff. But I can find images of other Aboriginal people on the outside of the infrastructure at the University of Queensland. In the Great Court you will see an image of an Aboriginal man etched into the building. A description explaining why that Aboriginal head is located on that building reads:

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Some motifs are repeated, but with pleasing variety of arrangement or expression, e.g. the poinsettia, cockatoo, flying-fox, Aboriginal. There is no need to attempt a complete catalogue of subjects - the game is to seek, at any odd moment to identify a few more Australian things which the average Australian does not recognise.\footnote{F. W. Robinson, ‘The University at St. Lucia and Other Centres’, c. 1956, University of Queensland History Collection (UQFL.458.13.1, 24), p. 36; quoted from Luke Keogh, ‘Sandstone Dreams’, \textit{Crossroads}, vol. V. no. 2 (2011), p. 17.}

What intrigues me is not only that university seemed out of my family’s imagination, but my location within the university was beyond the university's imagination as well.

There's a dilemma inherent in our push to Indigenise our institutions, particularly within the numbers game. There’s an investment in the aspiration building of Indigenous kids to come to universities and that’s fine, we need to build the pipeline and get the numbers of Aboriginal students coming through. Certainly I’ve been involved with our local university in advocacy about getting more Indigenous staff, more Indigenous students, about binding targets, I think that’s an important agenda. But the numbers game can be distracting sometimes and if the focus is just on the numbers and doesn’t look at issues of power and control then we miss the mark. We also need to look at how we reimagine the location of Indigenous people in these institutions, because clearly that imagination still prevails. In our rush to Indigenise institutions there are these different agendas which seem to be happening. There’s a push to get more Indigenous students, more Indigenous staff. There is a push to Indigenise the curriculum, Indigenise research and also there’s some cultural brokerage agendas that take place in workplaces that pop up all the time. All of these tasks are quite big and it seems that they tend to be seen as the responsibility of Aboriginal
academics. What frustrates me the most is that we are new to these spaces, new to these institutions. Many of us are first generation in our family to enter into these institutions, and it's us that has to remedy generations and decades-long traditions of exclusion. We have a shared responsibility to be challenging these institutions and challenging the way things are done. I went to an event recently at the University of Queensland, where people were given awards. There were some Indigenous and non-Indigenous people given awards and without fail, every non-Indigenous person who got up at the podium talked about their longstanding connection with the University of Queensland and coming there as a child. The Indigenous people that got on that stage did not have that story of connection and tradition with the institution. Yet we are given the responsibility to remedy this place. It’s not so easy.

Andrew Gunstone talks about how our involvement as Indigenous people should not occur just for the purpose of increasing the number and diversity of voices heard, but should also address issues of power, governance and control of what is being studied and taught.12 This suggests that our role as Indigenous academics is not to be the black face at the front of the class who just espouses what everyone else would do. We don’t want to just get bums on seats and faces out front. We want to change knowledge that’s been taught, we want to change how it’s done, we need to talk about protocol and ethics and how we do things. Philip talked the other week about not settling down into hierarchies and that’s something that really hit home for me, that when we come to these institutions we are supposed to be disrupting and changing, not accepting how things are done and becoming merely a number.

I’ve got this really powerful quote from Kessaris who talks about her first encounter in the classroom teaching Indigenous Studies. She says:

After a classroom experience in which I was teaching higher education studies at an introductory session on Indigenous studies I felt I needed stress counselling. The intensity of the students comments about Indigenous people felt like my identity had been repeatedly beaten with a baseball bat. I vowed never to go back into a classroom of a number of people to share anything about blackfella people. It was just too hard. In the end I did because I was expected to and felt at risk of being permanently branded incompetent.\(^{13}\)

This is not the only time that I’ve heard this story. Talking with other Indigenous colleagues, often debriefing about our experiences, this certainly isn’t uncommon for us. It poses the question: what is the experience of an Indigenous academic in our institutions? What can we learn from those experiences and what do we need to be careful of? I’m an early career academic, I want to be around for a long time, and I’ve seen those who have gone before me that now refuse outright to teach Indigenous Studies because they’ve had enough and they’re just not going to play that game any more. I can understand and respect that, but I would like to hope that I will be able to do this for a little while. Stories like this serve as cautionary tales to me and I think that it’s not one or two people, there’s a number of high profile Indigenous academics who say we’re not doing this any more because it's too draining. I think we need to learn from those experiences to make sure that there are more of us around in years to come. If we talk about numbers we have to also improve the quality of the experience of the staff and students.

So I looked at the literature about how Aboriginal academics were talking about their practice and it was really fascinating, the words that came up: ‘window dressing’, ‘native informant’, ‘the Aboriginalist’, ‘heartbreaking endeavour’. Aboriginal academics need to have a thick skin and secure identity, we need to be professional academics and professional Aboriginals. What’s interesting is we see it as highly desirable to have Indigenous academics and it’s great to see, but it comes with problems. Some of these problems have been ignored and dismissed, or the burden of responsibility gets rested on the heads of Indigenous academics. A really good example of this is that on more than one occasion I’ve had non-Indigenous academics give me advice about teaching Indigenous Studies and Indigenous knowledge. The words ‘blame’ and ‘guilt’ come up all the time. I’m given a stern warning to make sure that I attend to the wellbeing of the non-Indigenous students in my classroom, that I don’t make them feel guilty. There are times when no matter how friendly I am, how supportive I am, how much I smile through offensive comments and hold hands, there are students that leave the classroom feeling guilty, feeling bad, sometimes they even feel more guilty because they have had to witness me doing that exchange. Guilt is a natural response to the material that we deal with. If someone doesn’t feel bad about the stuff we talk about then I question what’s going on for them. But for some reason I am meant to be responsible for the emotional response that a non-Indigenous student has to hearing my family’s story, and that’s not fair. We look at this process and often times what we’re hoping for is some transformation for our students and sometimes they’re not going to get it in the lecture, they’re not going to get it at the end of the term but they may get it a year, two years later. If they don’t get it, it is seen to be our fault all the time and
I’m not sure that it’s our Aboriginality that is at fault.

But it is our Aboriginality itself that is confronting for many of our students. It’s our presence at the front of the lecture room that is confronting for them, not what we do and how we do it, our presence. I had a student this year who proudly came to Indigenous Studies because she wanted to ‘help the Aboriginals’. She came presuming to be the knower, so it shocked her that there could be an Aboriginal woman who lives in a bad neighbourhood, who has a tribe of kids, who is in the position of educator. Every bit of feedback for her assessment items she struggled with. It wasn’t about what I did or how I did it, it was because my existence and my location were confronting for her.

These relationships are changing by our presence and people have to renegotiate that. What I’m concerned about is that we’re trying to transform our students, we are trying to transform our institutions but we are being transformed in the process and not always in a healthy way. That’s where we have to tread really cautiously about what’s happening to us as we are continually embarking on this warrior scholarship. How are we taking care of ourselves in this process? How are we taking care of each other? How, as a community of Indigenous academics, are we looking out for each other? We talk about Aboriginality, whiteness, we talk about colonialism but they play out in the classroom. How do we model some of these ideas?

It’s really important that non-Indigenous people are teaching in Indigenous Studies. This is a somewhat controversial position to have, we know there’s some anxiety about it. I’m not free from that, I myself have been concerned about non-Indigenous people teaching about our issues. But some of Indigenous Studies is not actually just our issues. Race isn’t just ours to own. If
we’re the only ones talking about race, and it seems like we are, it teaches the students that it is just our business, when in fact it’s their imaginings of race that need to be explored and need to be opened up. It’s important that it’s not just Indigenous people teaching Indigenous Studies and that non-Indigenous people be part of that story too. I can talk about inter-generational trauma quite well. I can’t tell you a story about inter-generational privilege, but one of my non-Indigenous colleagues can talk about that really well. I’ve had situations where in my tutorials I have been absent for a couple of classes and students are shocked because suddenly when the non-Indigenous tutor comes in, more unpalatable ideas emerge in tutorial discussions. I know my presence is hindering their learning because people are uncomfortable talking about the native when the native is present. They need to be able to talk openly and freely about their views and to unpack and explore them. There are some of my students who would be better off having a non-Indigenous tutor to help them talk freely and openly about their stuff and not be so guarded, because they won’t grow from that experience.

What are the alternatives to this? What are we modelling to our students if we say that only Indigenous people can teach Indigenous Studies? Why then are we continuing to enrol students in Indigenous Studies? If non-Indigenous students can never come to know us, why are we teaching Indigenous Studies? It’s an uneasy kind of argument, but I just don’t know why we continue to offer non-Indigenous people the opportunity to study Indigenous Studies but never teach into Indigenous Studies. Professor Martin Nakata said recently that it’s not so much who teaches it as what is being taught, and the argument we need to be focused on is what is being taught. There are some things that need to be taught by us, there is some stuff that is going to be more powerful for our students if we
own it, control it, talk about it. But there are also spaces for non-Indigenous people to be talking about some of the concepts and ideas that we discuss. We actually need some people to help shoulder this load because our academics are burning out as a result of us doing it all and that’s what concerns me.

I look at our classrooms as the frontier. For many non-Indigenous people this is their first point of contact, their first exposure to Indigenous people. It can be very threatening and traumatic. I want to think about this: if we think about the frontier wars and what we can learn, maybe we would have won a few more. What are the things that we would have done better? Better strategy? With more numbers, I reckon we could have won a few more. So we think about it in our agenda in Indigenising institutions, what is our arsenal? What is our strategy? How are we building up the numbers, building up our army to engage in this so that we’re not the lone soldier in the trenches getting burnt out?

I take the idea of cultural safety from the health space. Cultural safety is about creating an environment that is safe for people where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. We need to think about cultural safety for Indigenous academics because every day there are assaults on our identity in the classroom, in the spirit of the learning of non-Indigenous students. We just have to suck it up and soldier on. Part of the safety story is recognising our audience; if we continually put Indigenous people in hostile crowds, in the compulsory Indigenous Studies courses, put Indigenous bodies on the frontline, we can’t be surprised at the casualties. We can’t question why Indigenous academics are angry when they are teaching Indigenous Studies, we’ve created that, we’ve set it up to be that way. It’s really important that our Indigenous academics are not constantly coordinating subjects that are
compulsory and having to engage in that, we need to share that load. We need to think about cultural safety for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and often in our first subjects, first lessons, we talk about cultural safety, what it means, we work that stuff out and yarn about it. It's important to still focus on the cultural safety for all people in the room, not just for the students, not just for the Indigenous students, not just for the non-Indigenous students.

Beyond the frontier, we need to count the casualties, we need to learn from their stories. I loved what Philip was saying about the ‘worst practice’ awards. There is so much learning to be gained from mistakes. We need to learn from what’s gone on. We need to think about who sets up the fringes, so when I’m asking for the inclusion of non-Indigenous people into our spaces it does not mean that Indigenous people sit at the fringes. So when I talk about us sitting at the fringes it means pulling in Indigenous people as guest lecturers for courses. We do need Indigenous staff coordinating units, driving the agenda and we can’t just be used as the guest lecturer spot or the occasional tutorial. What does winning the war mean? What is it going to look like? We have to think about cultural safety for non-Indigenous academics. I have no idea what that is or what it means but I know there needs to be a conversation around it. I’ve worked with some non-Indigenous people who have been in some really intense situations in classrooms and I know that they feel that they can’t talk about it but I think we need to talk about it some more, because I would like to know more about what it means and what’s involved. Because I actually want more people teaching into Indigenous Studies and pushing for the cause so it’s not just us.
Before starting I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we are on, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I would also like to identify myself as a proud Arrernte woman—think of that big blue blob in the middle of the country, that’s where I’m from if you’ve seen the map—and I’m related to half of Alice Springs. By way of my personal background and my involvement in the issues I want to discuss, I am a former staff member of the University of Melbourne, and worked here for eight and a half years, first at the Wilin Centre at the Victorian College of the Arts, and then at the Centre for Indigenous Education. My role was always within student support and recruitment. I’m also a graduate of the University of Melbourne and of LaTrobe Uni, so I’m a serial offender when it comes to being a student. I’ve been talking about doing my PhD for about 15 years now—I’ll get there eventually. But in the meantime I’m the National Indigenous Organiser for the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). I started my involvement with the NTEU on the Victorian Division Executive before becoming a branch activist here at Melbourne University, and when the national office noticed me causing a bit of a ruckus in that role, they decided to offer me a job. I also run a blog that I started up last year called Rantings of an Aboriginal Feminist and am now completely accidentally a guest and freelance opinion writer for Fairfax and The Guardian (Australia).

Just last year saw the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, also known as the Behrendt
Report. Several of its key recommendations coincide with those of two reports produced by the National Tertiary Education Union, both of which were the result of Indigenous member surveys in the past three years. The reports link in with the sort of recommendations that came out of the branches and with what staff around the country are seeing as the implications of a couple of these recommendations. Those two reports are the ‘Whole-of-University’ Approach to Indigenous Student Support and the I’m Not a Racist, But... report. I will go over their findings, as well as some general points of interest about the industry.

The Behrendt Report

Besides the report itself, the event that was held to launch the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People was very interesting, and says a lot about the way universities have since taken up its recommendations. It was an incredibly inspiring day: there were a lot of things talked about concerning actual access levels, increasing Indigenous knowledge pools across the universities, active engagement in research, and cultural competency training, among many other things. But it was really telling to me (and from my unionist background hopefully I’ve already admitted my bias) that while the senator who was there to launch it gave his speech, all of the Vice-Chancellors were in the room; it looked like they were actively engaged and it was going to be a wonderful day. But after the senator left, it seemed there were only about four or five vice chancellors from across the entire country that had stuck around. It was as if they were there to be noticed and seen as engaging, but once it came to hearing from the different universities and the experiences of people who were actually trying to grow this stuff every day, a lot of them didn’t
seem to want to hang around. I think this really set the scene for where things might now be heading.

*Parity*

One of the factors the Behrendt Report considered was the parity rate. The parity rate for universities has been defined as 2.2%, which is the Indigenous percentage of the total Australian working-age population (between 15 and 64 years old). In other words, parity is the point where the percentage of Indigenous people in universities is the same as the percentage of Indigenous people in relation to the total Australian population. Recent census data has actually increased our identifying population, and for that reason a clause was written into the Report that every single time new census data became available, the parity rate in universities would be reviewed. Obviously, our numbers are going to be increasing over the years. It also states that both student and staff numbers should increase to at least the defined parity rate based on university-set targets and timeframes, which is self-explanatory. There should also be targets for priority areas, many of which are based around the Close the Gap initiative, which looks at specific targets within each cache, that is, within health and the under-represented areas. Traditionally, as I think a lot of people know, there is a bit of a skewing when it comes to the Arts—this is where the great majority of Indigenous practitioners and Indigenous students have tended to find themselves, but the authors of the Report are looking to diversify the cohort of students and staff across all discipline areas. They have also indicated that as the universities reach these targets and put in place these sorts of programs, there should be some kind of incentive payment for the universities so that good work in Indigenous Studies is actually recognised by the government.
A little bit about the current state of play: Indigenous staff make up just over 0.9% of the industry based on 2012 numbers, where general staff sits around 1% and academic staff makes up 0.8%, and that’s in fact a doubling of the real staff numbers in the last 10 years. It sounds woeful, but compared to 10 years ago it is a vast improvement. It is also interesting to note that for staff and students we see a severe gender imbalance, as women constitute two thirds (67%) of current staff. The higher education sector as a whole is around about 55% women, so it’s already a female-dominated sector, but we’re really throwing the statistics out. And the student make-up reflects those numbers too. It must be the only place I can ever think of where I need to push to get a few more men on board.

It is also worth highlighting the fact that the Indigenous unionisation rate has quadrupled in the same time. This isn’t about me patting the union on the back and saying they’ve done a good job, because working within them I spend half my time arguing with them as well. But it is about recognising that over 40% of the Indigenous staff across the entire industry are unionised, and when you look at our academic staff that actually jumps to over 60%. I highlight that I think that reflects an increase in real numbers within the industry. I also reckon that, culturally, looking towards ways to organise collectively seems to be a quite natural thing for us. The other factor that I believe really drives unionisation is that the Indigenous staff or even the non-Indigenous people who work in Indigenous disciplines are more likely to come up against adversity when they are in the sector because they are constantly trying to validate to a wider structure why it is that what they are doing is important. In that context there seem to be a lot more pushes and pulls and as a result people are more likely to seek assistance from the likes of a union.
Turning now to the student population, Indigenous students make up 1.4% of the total cohort, so that’s an increase of about a third in the same 10-year time period. A graph of the member growth shows where we’ve had a couple of threats, where there’s been some plateaus, what has encouraged it to grow. For instance, in 2001 and 2002 the mandatory Indigenous claim was brought into university bargaining rounds. So things like Indigenous targets, Indigenous committees to monitor employment, and even cultural leave, language allowance—all of these started being brought in in 2002, and it is roughly this time when we start to see a steeper growth rate. When it comes to 2005 and 2006, however, where we had the Higher Education Workplace Relation reforms come through along with changes to Abstudy, we actually saw the numbers of both staff and students decline. When the HEWRs were removed again we started to see that great big peak building up; it has been growing since then, and I’m hoping that we are still going towards growth. We can see, then, that while there has been a drive towards parity for some time, there is still a long way to go and I do have concerns with the future, which I will discuss later.

So how is this playing out right now? Many people might know that we are currently in Enterprise Bargaining at nearly every university. In fact, up until about a month and a half ago, every single university in Victoria was out on industrial action, and we’ve only just come to agreement in a couple of sites. But at every single one of those institutions, the Indigenous claim has been the first thing that has been negotiated, with universities invariably pushing for a percentage target rather than a real, numerical one. We argued this round that we wouldn’t be going for a percentage of Indigenous staff at the institutions because all the universities need to do is lay off 200 staff and they’ve reached their parity
targets. And sadly, that is what we’ve seen happen at a couple of universities. We went for an actual numeric target that could be partial, it could be played over two rounds along with the Indigenous claim in total which includes, like I said, everything from the implementation committees around Indigenous Studies, Indigenous employment, the language allowances, cultural leave—all of which were being bargained straight up. And at nearly every university bar about two that I can think of, maybe three, these claims have been really contentious and a couple of universities have tried their hardest to remove everything Indigenous from the collective agreements. They’ve even argued that reconciliation action plans and Indigenous employment strategies already cover that sort of material, but both of those documents (which are wonderful working documents) are not enforceable like a collective agreement; there is nothing to hold universities to either of those documents, they are just statements of intent.

Also of pressing importance to how things stand today is the broader political environment. For instance, Indigenous students are much more likely to be affected by the recent higher education funding cuts. A lot of our students tick a number of the boxes that made them eligible for such things as the Start-Up Scholarships because they, obviously, were eligible for Abstudy, both of which are now threatened with getting the axe. What we are worried about is that our students are hitting a more financially strenuous time where there’s going to be, under this government, an increasing turn towards private sector funding, and that without government support we may see problems with student retention, making it harder to grow our knowledge pool in the years to come. All of these factors threaten to bring lasting damage to the drive towards parity.

*The ‘Whole-of-University’ Approach*
I’ll now move on to Recommendations 10 and 11 of the Behrendt Report, which tread more or less the same ground as the NTEU’s ‘Whole-of-University’ Approach member survey, and which I think a lot of people in the sector have been waiting for for a really long time. Central is the idea that faculties and mainstream support units have primary responsibility for the support of Indigenous students, not simply a ghettoised attempt to support the students throughout the sector only within explicitly Indigenous units. It means actual universities picking up the ball and running with it and seeing that there are unique things affecting Indigenous students, which require offering cultural competency training and skills development to staff within the various areas to be able to recognise where there are these tensions. It is something that we have all been talking about for a while: I remember when I worked in Student Support, one of the things I said was that I would love to work myself out of a job, and by that I meant that there wouldn’t be a need for an Indigenous Student Support Officer because everyone in the university would know how to assist an Indigenous student—they would have the culture and knowledge, the necessary background in order to do that. I don’t think we are anywhere near that point yet, but it was a good dream at the time and can still give us something to work towards.

The other part that the Behrendt Report was incredibly clear on was that the Indigenous education units needed to be strengthened and kept as culturally inclusive environments on campuses that were supported by adequate funding as well as initiatives like tutorial assistant programs and community outreach. The report was very much about having the Indigenous centre strengthened and
buoyed and actually given some prominence within the university while the entire 
university also starts to pick up the ball when it comes to Indigenous anything.

Just a little bit of background: what we recently found was that 
approximately 84% of universities currently have an Indigenous support centre. 
Some of them just have an officer but at most universities they operate as 
autonomous units. Indigenous curriculum, this won’t be a shock to any of you, is 
mainly found within specific areas of universities. These tend to be the Arts, 
Health, Education, sometimes Law, though there are a couple that are different to 
that. And additionally you sometimes find curricula by the Indigenous support 
centres themselves, so they have their specific course subject offerings for 
Indigenous students. Some of these are offered as ‘block release programs’, 
‘enabling programs’ or just general courses in Indigenous Studies. Most non-
Indigenous students at this point in time have very fleeting exposure to 
Indigenous knowledges in their academic careers, and Behrendt recommends (in 
recommendation 18) that there be an embedding of these knowledges so that all 
students who enter an Australian university come out with some sort of 
Indigenous knowledge at the end of their course.

This is a side point for me, but things like block release programs and 
alternative delivery of courses for Indigenous students could currently be under 
threat. The reason that I say that is because we are at a time when things like 
funding to the sector are being questioned—for instance, we had the LNP up in 
Queensland basically state that they didn’t support Abstudy because apparently it 
was some sort of ‘reverse racism’ and everyone’s the same. These are the sorts of 
ideas floating around, and I wonder how much they are going to come to
prominence in the current term. Hopefully they are being quashed on the head, but you can never tell sometimes. I have seen the reverse racism argument being used more and more in everyday speech about anything Indigenous.

As I said, this is data based on our ‘Whole-of-University’ Approach to Indigenous Student Support survey that we put out to the members this year. Our response rate wasn’t huge, I’ll admit that straight up—it was around about 20% and the actual data that we got back in a way reflected why that was. A lot of people are very tentative about this, they are not too sure about how to interpret it. What we found was that the respondents we did get marginally supported a whole-of-university approach, feeling that universities have long neglected their commitments to Indigenous students, staff and studies. That’s not a shock, we’ve all said that before. The areas where respondents indicated concern were all geared around the implementation of the whole-of-university approach by the universities, and this included things like academic workloads, staff morale, job security, work-life balance, career progression and professional development opportunities.

On looking at what’s going on around the sector at this point, we’ve also found that rather than a whole-of-university approach, what we’re actually seeing is a fair bit of mainstreaming. At some universities we’ve seen Indigenous Student Support Officers shift into mainstream support units. Indigenous students aren’t necessarily accessing those staff members anymore, because they’re locked away; at one university we even heard you needed swipe card access or to call to make an appointment. Indigenous students have tended not to call and make appointments—they and their community like to drop in to a centre and hang out and actually feel like they are being included rather than having to go through
what is quite a sterile kind of process. Some of the support centres have also been dissolved or close to, so the ‘building-up’ that Behrendt indicated isn’t necessarily taking place.

It seems that much Indigenous-focussed content in some of the academic programs is being spread out across the entire university to tick the ‘whole-of-university approach’ box, rather than building up the capacity of academics across the entire university to deliver Indigenous content. So Indigenous Studies may be being dissolved at this point in time. Indigenous staff are being isolated and spread out: anyone with some sort of knowledge is being shifted into faculty discipline areas and it seems that rather than build capacity, universities have been more concerned with dispersing and dissipating existing capacity. It also could potentially mean that research funding as well as student support funding is being scattered across the entire university, and whether it actually ends up being geared towards Indigenous research or Indigenous student support is then left for the faculties themselves to decide. A number of the Indigenous education units right now are under threat or ‘under review’. Some of these threats are quite serious at a couple of universities right now, and Indigenous staff are getting shifted out sideways. I’m a bit worried about where it is all going.

Racism and lateral violence in the sector

Some other findings I wanted to highlight came out of the NTEU’s I’m Not a Racist, But... survey. It’s worth pointing out that as it stands, the NTEU is one of the only unions that actually has an Indigenous organiser working nationally; a lot of unions have Indigenous representatives but not someone who is actually dedicated to members and to purely Indigenous campaigns. The NTEU has been light years ahead of that and, as I go through some of the data we’ve collected,
you will see the effects that that has had. *I’m Not a Racist, But...* was our Indigenous member survey that we conducted two years ago and the response rate on this was a very high 70%, which suggests people really wanted to talk about the sort of racism and discrimination they were experiencing in the sector. What came back out of this was quite astounding. When we had our survey respondents report back on racial discrimination, 93.1% said they’d experienced it, nearly 80% felt that they had been treated less respectfully in their workplaces as a result of others’ perception of their culture or cultural obligations, 71.5% had directly experienced racial discrimination in the workplace, and 60.6% had experienced lateral violence (internalised, same-level bullying between Indigenous colleagues). It certainly made clear the way Indigenous people are put in competition within the university’s structure of power.

I bring attention to that report because it prompted some questions: if some universities are absorbing Indigenous Studies practitioners from Indigenous Studies programs into other programs, what effect will this have on knowledge pools, on specific course development, on support for staff and career progression? In the areas that Indigenous researchers and academic staff are being moved into, are their knowledges being dissipated? Do these areas grasp the importance of Indigenous knowledges within the University? Do they have the necessary skills to actually assist in supervising or carrying out Indigenous research that might be being done, and if so, will they respect it? There’s reason to be concerned here. If Indigenous student support centres are being splintered and financial support is being dissipated or otherwise compromised, what effect will have this have on the numbers of future Indigenous Studies practitioners? If the students coming through at the moment are really struggling the entire time
they are at university rather than being adequately supported in units dedicated to
them, will they stick around in the sector or will their experiences be so negative
that they end up shifting off into other industries? And while the previous survey
was from Indigenous members only, what does that say about the majority of
universities and the way non-Indigenous staff currently handle Indigenous
content and issues on campus? Of course, one of the points in the Behrendt
Report was about growing your own, which means keeping people in the sector
and building up these experts in various areas to continue contributing knowledge
into those fields.

Things to come
What else is of concern? We have had a change of government, and last time we
had a Coalition government we had the workplace reforms, we had the fee
increases, and I wonder whether the recommendations of the Behrendt report,
which was commissioned under a Labor government, could potentially be
sidelined in a completely different political environment. We are just about to
have the National Indigenous Advisory Committee installed and they’ve very
much been selected, so we need to ask whether there’s going to be a preferencing
of certain ways of doing Indigenous business at this point in time and whether
universities are going to be pushed towards those ways as well rather than
looking at the whole picture. So I wonder how the formidable intentions within
Behrendt are going to be received by universities under these conditions. Of
course, we can’t let the ALP off the hook with this either, because prior to the
change of government they slashed 2.3 billion from the sector, and that actually
made up a grand total of 4.5 billion worth of cuts over the last three years. The
one thing that I have always found with cuts is that Arts departments seem to be
the first area to come under attack, and given what I noted earlier about
Indigenous practitioners and Indigenous content mostly being centred on Arts,
this means Indigenous people are going to be the first and hardest hit by
university funding cuts.

So what do I see as the opportunities with the Behrendt report within all
this stuff? I think having Indigenous Studies practitioners across the entire
university could definitely lead to greater inclusivity—provided they’re put
within areas that are receptive to them—and could lead to further development of
Indigenous content in departments and discipline areas that we’ve never seen
them in before. Take, for instance, the sciences: with what’s been going on in
New South Wales, everyone is talking at the moment about fire management, so
environmental sciences might start looking more and more broadly at that and
even creating centres of excellence for Indigenous knowledges within that field.
The Indigenous knowledge pool could definitely be expanded by all students
engaging with Indigenous knowledges in a range of different fields rather than
just within specific areas of courses. We’ve also now got Indigenous Fields of
Research codes, so for the first time there’s some real prestige attached to people
who do studies and can get them recognised as Indigenous Studies within the
academic Fields of Research, like what they’ve got from Arid Studies. This
development has been long overdue, and could lead to better recognition of
Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous research more broadly.

Of course, for all the opportunities, there are some concerns as well. I
have already highlighted this above, but specific Indigenous programs may
dissipate or stagnate as universities seek to embed them across the entire
institution, and isolating people could create a barrier to exchange between
Indigenous practitioners. Indigenous-specific research may decline due to falling student numbers or may become more difficult in non-inclusive departments. And indeed, development of universities as inclusive spaces may fall off the radar completely in an environment of cuts, while priority areas may be specifically limited to industries that are identified as consistent with governmental goals. Just to highlight a small example of this, what are the dangers when we’re all talking about building up Indigenous business or driving towards mining and resource extraction? There’s every chance that the identified priority areas as well as the scholarships and the research dollars will reflect that, and you have to wonder what sort of bigger effect that’s going to have on everything else.
CLOSING DISCUSSION

Sandra Phillips

I’m Sandra Phillips, officially Dr Sandra Phillips, and I’m a descendant of the Wakka Wakka peoples of Southern Queensland and the Gureng Gureng peoples of Southern Queensland. If I have any countrymen or women in the room today I’m not sure. I acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation as well.

So thank you Celeste and thank you Philip, that was incredible, the scope, the depth, the inherent challenge that it poses to us and the work that we need to continue doing. I know that we’ve got a room full of diverse Indigenous Studies practitioners here so the breakout session will enable us to get into more nitty gritty issues. Now both of our presenters this morning actually gave us not only the big picture and the little picture, but also the questions. So I’m going to just rip off their prior work a little bit in identifying questions for the workshop.

So Celeste, to your presentation, a contextualisation of the Behrendt report which is part of your brief today. You are bringing together work that’s done at the institutional level in the higher education sector; the broader landscape of policy, tradition, habit and potential for change helped us consider the ways in which change can continue in our own practices. I think the real dilemma between policy aspiration and ambition and the reality on the ground is also what you helped to bring into focus today. So, how do we understand the bigger picture policy in relation to the everyday practice on the ground? — whether we are Indigenous or not Indigenous, teachers, lecturers, unit coordinators, parents of people who are Indigenous Studies students, whatever. How do we see our own role in relation to policy, how do we see our practice and the practices of others around us, and what gaps are there in between?
This may in fact bring us to one of Philip’s ideas about the ‘worst practice’ awards. While we don’t like to focus on negative questions, sometimes we probably have to if we are actually going to get to the nub of things. You know, it is great to talk about best practices, it is even greater to analyse them. Philip was highlighting the absence of real analysis of the predetermining criteria for what’s considered best or worst. So perhaps we can link our factors for determining criteria for what’s considered best with the theme of gaps between rhetoric and action. How best to analyse the worst in a way that pays homage to our own cultural traditions, which are about not necessarily publicly shaming people? How do we actually go about making change without necessarily insulting people, without necessarily correcting them publically? but then also being able to have some influence that actually corrects their behaviour in a sustainable way.

So I think for me what Philip is asking is how do we remain true to our Indigenous cultural values while working in particular corporate spaces with inherent values that are almost diametrically opposed? How do we fulfil our human potential in corporate spaces like universities? And the ‘we’ there, that’s as Indigenous people and as non-Indigenous people. So I think that’s a question that could lead to inclusive dialogue.

Just let me refer to Celeste’s information and insights in imagining where a climate of cuts, for example, might take us. Celeste, once again, you’ve enacted Aboriginal value from my point of view in not just saying ‘it’s because we’ve got a Liberal government’; you highlighted Labor government too. We’re not partisan with our politics, it’s really looking at the evidence: if you’ve had $4.5 billion worth of cuts in the sector under a range of governments, and we’ve no doubt got cuts pending, it’s not a party political issue. We know from looking at past experience that cuts lead to certain outcomes, so we could frame a question around that as well.
How do we bring our collective wisdom to a situation that we know is coming, based on our prior knowledge? How do we anticipate those possible problems which, as Celeste highlighted, atomise the university? I think you represented what Behrendt did really well, which is not to fall into the western predilection (which I despise) for binary. Behrendt identified in her report that we need a whole-of-university approach and that Indigenous education centres or Indigenous support units should be strengthened. So it is not one or the other; and I love that Celeste brought the issue so succinctly to a whole-of-university approach rather than mainstreaming. Okay, but what you were identifying this morning is that it seems that some universities are taking this moment in history as an opportunity to mainstream, dilute and fracture (as opposed to enrich, enhance and improve) those things that are rhetorically our policy goals—to enable every student of a university in Australia to access Indigenous knowledge. If that’s our policy goal, which is at heart a wonderfully ethical policy goal, how does the corporation actually do more than just say that and then use it as a cover to mainstream and weaken at the same time? So it’s a very challenging space that we work in.

Let me see if I can get some more specifics. All of your statistics, Celeste, were obviously really valuable. It is an important moment in higher education right now, a moment where’s there more people like me, for example, who finished our PhDs, more people like Celeste who have worked in the sector for about 20 years or so. So while there’s still a lot of negative stuff, we’re at a time when the investment made by our ancestors to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are accessing formal education is leading to a mob who can go out there and actually use the tools of the master’s house, not necessarily to dismantle but certainly to change from within. Or to set up a completely different house, you know, which is why people ask: ‘Has anyone ever thought about an Indigenous university?’ I don’t know how many times I have heard people say that. It’s like
‘yeah, where’s our public discussion, where’s our public discourse?’, because people have been talking about an Indigenous university for decades. Who knows if maybe that’s an answer, I’m not advocating it, I’m just putting it into play.

I like Philip’s value-driven practice; what does it truly mean at the level of Indigenous Studies practice to be value driven? And what are the values that we’re being driven by? Philip’s key words obviously refer to Old Man Paddy Roe, things must go both ways; so teaching and learning is about relationship as well as mastery of content (however you weight those components).

An example from the corporate environment: I’m having a dialogue at the moment with HR at the Queensland University of Technology. I’ve had 25 years of experience in the areas of applied research, sessional teaching and book editing and publishing, and I took the time to spend 5 years (4 year 8 months to be exact) to start and finish a PhD. And then I get a fulltime gig, a 3-year fixed term position in a university, and I have to spend the first 16 weeks, basically, resisting the label ‘early career’. So that example relates to how the corporation tries to contain this human talent that on the one hand it wants to bring into the house but on the other hand doesn’t know how to handle.

So I’m an atomised entity. I’m employed in the creative industries faculty of QUT in the particular discipline of creative writing and literary studies. Aileen Moreton-Robinson comments that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics contribute a dual value, you know, we bring our discipline as well as our cultural strength. My concern for all of us is does our dual value then mean we do double the job? Are we the Indigenous person as well as the academic? So that’s perhaps a question.

I’m wondering then too about a question of space in the corporation for first peoples or first nations, the traditional owners from the country that the university is on. What’s the
best kind of way to ensure their voices are incorporated into the university decision-making? This is the flipside to what Philip was saying about the lack of transparency around the bonuses that senior management get for KPIs that are not revealed to those who are required to help achieve them. We don’t know what values or priorities are driving particular behaviours, and we become subject to rather than participants in the reward cycle and all the rest of it. So there’s a question around governance and decision-making, and ensuring that traditional owners have a say that has systemic impact at the university as opposed to simply cosmetic.

In talking around ethics, every day we are faced with having to make a decision in relation to students. So how do we draw on the existing corpus of wisdom while also treating the student as a unique individual at the time? How do we access each other’s experience to inform a daily practice that requires an ethical decision to be made? For example, any student asks me for an extension, at this stage I say yes. I make a date that fits to ensure that I can supply the marks to the machine by the date that it needs but I don’t necessarily make students go through the formal extension request process; if they give it to me, I mark it, I put it into the machine by the due date. So I take responsibility as the teacher to feed the machine as it needs to be fed. I make an ethical decision that a due date is an arbitrary point set by someone else for some other reason, so if it doesn’t suit the life of that student at that time I allow flexibility. So perhaps there’s a question around what situations do practitioners find themselves in that require an ethical decision? And how does that ethical decision correlate with or contradict the prevailing corporate practice or expectations?

As a final response to Philip’s presentation, I thought of the Latin phrase *primum non nocere*, first do no harm. How do we actually practice in a way where we first do no harm? —particularly in corporate environments that don’t necessarily care whether they do harm or not.
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