Indigenous Leadership and Governance in Australian Universities

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Abstract

In this article, I analyse a critical factor confronting Australian higher education—the involvement of Indigenous people in leadership and governance within universities. First, I examine the importance of this key factor in addressing the educational aspirations of Indigenous people at universities. Secondly, I discuss the results of a survey I conducted in 2012 on the approaches of universities towards the participation of Indigenous people in university leadership and governance. I argue that despite the demonstrable importance of this key factor, universities have clearly failed to genuinely address Indigenous leadership and governance. I also compare the results of the 2012 survey with the results obtained from similar previous surveys I conducted in 2000 and 2007.

Introduction

Australian universities have been failing Indigenous people for many decades. In the past 20 years, a significant number of publications have comprehensively argued that Indigenous people face substantial educational disadvantage in the university system and have provided many recommendations to address this disadvantage. These publications include government reports and academic manuscripts (Battiste and Henderson 2000; Behrendt, Larkin, Griew and Kelly 2012; Bourke 1996; Christensen and Lilley 1997; DEET 1989, 1993, 1994; DEEWR 2011; Devlin 2009; Frawley, Nolan and White 2009; IEHAC 2006; MCEETYA 1995, 2000; Moreton-Robinson, Walter, Singh and Kimber 2011; Phillips 2005; Smith 2004; West 1995). These publications have consistently identified several key factors essential for addressing Indigenous educational aspirations in universities, including: Indigenous leadership and governance, community engagement, culture, cultural competency, employment, anti-racist policies, research, curriculum, teaching and student support.

In this article, I analyse one of these key factors—the involvement of Indigenous people in university leadership and governance. First, I discuss my approach to conducting this research, which involves analysing the strategic plans and governance structures of a sample of twelve Australian universities. Secondly, I explore the critical importance of Indigenous people participating in leadership and governance within Australian universities. Thirdly, I argue that despite this importance—clearly argued in many publications over the past two decades—Australian universities have demonstrably failed to develop strategies, processes and policies that recognise, support and address the engagement of Indigenous people in leadership and governance in universities.

Approach

I used a sample of twelve Australian universities to analyse university approaches to Indigenous leadership and governance. I selected these universities so that there was an equitable representation of universities regarding location (metropolitan, regional, state), type (group of eight (leading Australian universities) and non-group of eight) and Indigenous student cohort size. I have previously used this same sample in 2000 and 2007 in analysing university approaches to addressing the above-mentioned factors regarding Indigenous educational aspirations (Gunstone 2000, 2008). Australia has a public university system and all these universities are publicly-funded. Universities receive substantial funding from the national government, are established by state or territory government legislation and are accountable to national and state or territory governments. The characteristics of the twelve universities selected for the research project are represented below in Table 1.

Table 1: Criteria of the twelve selected universities

	2000	**2007**	**2012**
Location	Metropolitan – 9 Regional – 3	Metropolitan – 9 Regional – 3	Metropolitan – 9 Regional – 3
State	NSW, Vic, Qld – 3 WA, SA, Tas – 1	NSW, Vic, Qld – 3 WA, SA, Tas – 1	NSW, Vic, Qld – 3 WA, SA, Tas – 1
Type	Group of Eight – 3 Non-Group – 9	Group of Eight – 3 Non-Group – 9	Group of Eight – 3 Non-Group – 9
Indigenous student cohort size	Under 100 – 3 101 to 200 – 6 201 to 300 – 3 Over 300 – 0	Under 100 – 2 101 to 200 – 3 201 to 300 – 3 Over 300 – 4	Under 100 – 1 101 to 200 – 2 201 to 300 – 4 Over 300 – 5

The cohort figures for the 2000, 2007 and 2012 analyses were obtained respectively from 1998, 2005 and 2011 data, because of the time lag between obtaining data and publishing data (DEST 1998, 2005; DIISRTE 2011). While these figures illustrate that the size of the Indigenous student cohort has increased at these universities between 1998 and 2011, throughout Australia, the numbers of Indigenous higher education students, as a proportion of all higher education students, has not increased overall. As the Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations review states:

> Since 2001, the total number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students participating in higher education has increased by 20.8%. Yet, due to increasing rates of participation in higher education by non-Indigenous students, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander proportion of total students has remained unchanged at approximately 1.3% (DEEWR 2011: 10).

In analysing the approaches to Indigenous leadership and governance of these twelve selected universities, I have predominantly drawn on the strategic plans of the universities. These documents have been selected as they are the key approach that universities use to articulate,

both internally and externally, the visions, aspirations, values, priorities, policies, goals and strategies that they will pursue over the following three to five years. I analyse each selected university's strategic plan to investigate whether that university has developed policies, priorities, goals or strategies regarding the involvement of Indigenous people in university leadership and governance. In this way, I support Anderson et al's argument (1998: xviii) that the absence of a particular issue within a university's strategic plan strongly suggests the university is not genuinely committed to addressing the issue.

I acknowledge that the existence of such policies or strategies in the strategic plan does not itself ensure that a university is addressing this key factor. However, the existence of these policies does indicate if the university has at least articulated its commitment to addressing the participation of Indigenous people in leadership and governance of universities. Further, if the university does not refer to a vision, policy or strategy regarding its approach to Indigenous leadership or governance in the strategic plan, I believe that this indicates either that the university has no such policy or strategy, or, if it does, that it deems it not important enough to include it or refer to it in its strategic plan. In this case, the university may include the policy or strategy in a lower profile document, such as the Indigenous education strategy, reconciliation statement or equity plan.

I also look at each of the university's strategic plans to explore if they refer to an Indigenous education statement or Indigenous education strategy. All Australian universities have long been required by the national government to develop an Indigenous education statement (DETYA 1999: 71). Many universities also develop an Indigenous education strategy to address issues such as student recruitment and curriculum (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew and Kelly 2012: 147). These documents outline the aspirations, policies, goals and approaches of universities regarding issues such as leadership and governance, teaching, student support, research, culture, cultural competency, employment, community engagement and curriculum. However, despite universities developing these documents, they still have a responsibility to discuss and address Indigenous policies and approaches, and refer to the documents, in their strategic plans, which are the primary policy documents for universities. Interestingly, Moreton-Robinson, Walter, Singh and Kimber's (2011: 10) evaluation of the 2009/10 Indigenous education statements contained several general criticisms of the statements, such as that they lacked 'adequate customary management practices', focused on funding instead of a broad goal, had unclear reporting processes, inappropriately grouped Indigenous peoples with 'equity issues' and had inadequate financial reporting.

The other method I use to investigate the universities' approaches to Indigenous leadership and governance is to analyse the involvement of Indigenous people in university governance. I do this by looking at the websites of the universities. I investigate the numbers of Indigenous people who are members of key university committees, including university councils, academic boards and human research ethics committees. I also look at the numbers of Indigenous people who are in key Indigenous-specified, university-wide senior management positions, such as pro-vice chancellors. I also examine the proximity of the key Indigenous governance bodies in universities, the Indigenous centres and Indigenous advisory committees, to the main university governance entities, the vice chancellors and university councils.

The importance of Indigenous leadership and governance in universities

Indigenous people have long been, and continue to be, substantially disempowered within Australian universities in a broad range of areas, including: teaching, curriculum, research, culture, cultural competency, policies, community engagement, student access, retention, success and completion rates and employment. This lack of power has resulted in historical and contemporary discrimination and marginalisation of Indigenous people within Australian universities.

The involvement of Indigenous people in university leadership and governance is an essential factor in addressing both this disempowerment and the educational aspirations of Indigenous

people in universities (DEEWR 2011; DEET 1989; Frawley and White 2010; Fredericks, White, Bunda and Baker 2011; Hampton 2009; IHAEC 2006; MCEETYA 1995; Moreton-Robinson, Walter, Singh and Kimber 2011; Nakata 1995; Whatman and Duncan 1995). The genuine participation in university leadership and governance by Indigenous staff and students—as well as by the Indigenous communities whose land universities are situated on—will substantially improve outcomes for Indigenous people in the above-mentioned areas, and will assist in addressing Indigenous self-determination.

In a research paper commissioned for *The Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (2012), Moreton-Robinson, Walter, Singh and Kimber (2011: 13-14) asked key questions, including: 'How well do universities incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation into their structures of governance?' and 'How efficacious is the governance of programs to build Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student and staff participation and cultural presence within universities?'. They argued that their research into university governance relating to Indigenous higher education is specifically relevant to key issues such as:

> … parity for Indigenous students, researchers and staff; and the effectiveness of existing Australian Government programs in encouraging better outcomes for Indigenous Australians in higher education … [and] best practice and opportunities for change in the whole-of-university culture, policies, activities, and programs (2011: 13-14).

The authors (2011: 10-12) developed a number of critically important recommendations regarding Indigenous leadership and governance in universities, including linking the participation of Indigenous people in university governance to government funding, mandating the development by all universities of a genuinely accountable business plan for Indigenous educational outcomes, and requiring all universities to appoint at least one Indigenous person to the level of pro- or deputy-vice chancellor.

In a background paper for *The Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (2012), Pechenkina and Anderson also argued for the importance of Indigenous people being involved in leadership and governance in universities, for the following reasons:

> Leadership: Indigenous leadership is critical to achieve the improvements required within a robust partnership framework. This leadership capability needs to be developed and reflected across the organisational structure of universities, including senior management.

> This paradigm ultimately requires a realignment of Indigenous strategy within universities in order to develop a university wide strategy in which Indigenous strategy is integrated within the core business and accountabilities of the institution. This change will not be possible without the development of an Indigenous leadership capability within a university management. The integration of Indigenous strategy requires the embedding of an Indigenous focus into university-wide business planning processes and cycles in order to move beyond the effective marginalisation of Indigenous student programs from university decision-making and the development of adequate structures that enable Indigenous leadership to effect real change (2011: 15).

Similarly, the peak advisory body to the Commonwealth government on Indigenous higher education, the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC), argued the significance of the participation of Indigenous people in university leadership and governance in their 2006 report *Improving Indigenous Outcomes and Enhancing Indigenous Culture and Knowledge in Australian Higher Education*, stating:

> Few things are more critical to the long-term advancement of Indigenous people than increasing the number of Indigenous people in university leadership roles. Universities

have much to benefit from the contribution of Indigenous people in such roles. The conference noted that in New Zealand universities there are a number of Pro Vice-Chancellor positions, or their equivalent, with designated responsibilities for Maori students. It is essential to devise ways to encourage universities to focus on institutional leadership and the creation of a critical mass of Indigenous academic leaders (IHEAC 2006: 5).

It is critical to note, however, in discussing the issue of involvement of Indigenous people in university leadership and governance, that the types and levels of engagement by Indigenous people, including staff, students and communities, in the leadership and governance of universities cannot be solely determined by the universities, but must also be decided by Indigenous people. As Ivory (2008: 254) argues:

> … there is a considerable gap in understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous sectors about leadership and governance, and … this gap generates political contestation over power and authority in post-colonial Australian society.

In recent years, there have been a number of projects and programs that have attempted to address Indigenous approaches and understandings concerning leadership and governance, including in Australian universities (AILC 2012; CYI 2012; DFHCSIA 2012; Foley 2010; Sarra 2010; SSI 2012). Two examples are the Australian Learning and Teaching Council funded projects, *An Institutional Leadership Paradigm: Transforming practices, structures and conditions in Indigenous higher education*, led by researchers from Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and Australian Catholic University (Fasoli and Frawley 2010; Frawley and White 2010) and *Tiddas Showin' Up, Talkin' Up and Puttin' Up: Indigenous Women and Educational Leadership* project, led by researchers from Flinders University and the Australian Catholic University (Fredericks, White, Bunda and Baker 2011; Fredericks and White 2011).

University approaches to Indigenous leadership and governance

Of the twelve Australian universities surveyed in 2012, just two mentioned issues relating to the participation of Indigenous people in university leadership and governance in their strategic plans. One stated the need to increase Indigenous 'involvement in decision-making' and the other stated the importance of improving the participation of Indigenous people 'at all levels of governance' in the university. However, neither included key performance indicators or targets in relation to Indigenous engagement in leadership or governance. This inadequate result is similar to the poor results recorded in the 2000 and 2007 surveys which revealed that none of the twelve selected universities mentioned Indigenous leadership and governance in their strategic plans.

Also, only three of the twelve universities surveyed in 2012 mentioned in their strategic plan that the university had an Indigenous education strategy or Indigenous education statement. This was a similarly poor result to that obtained in the 2000 and 2007 surveys, both of which recorded that just one of the twelve universities acknowledged the existence of an Indigenous education strategy or Indigenous education statement in their strategic plan.

Further, four of the universities surveyed in 2012 did not mention any Indigenous issue at all—such as student support, curriculum, research, policies, community engagement, education and cultural competency—in their strategic plan. This is a similarly poor result to that gathered from the 2000 and 2007 surveys, which saw five and three universities respectively not mention any Indigenous issue in their strategic plan.

These issues relating to the strategic plans of the twelve universities are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Strategic plans and Indigenous issues

	2000	2007	2012
Mentions Indigenous leadership and governance	0	0	2
Mentions Indigenous education strategy or statement	1	1	3
Does not mention any Indigenous issue	5	3	4

The twelve selected universities surveyed in 2012 also fared poorly when I analysed the involvement of Indigenous people in university governance. There were very few Indigenous-identified positions on the university's key committees. An identified position means the position is reserved for an Indigenous person. It is often the director of the university's Indigenous centre. Thus, an Indigenous person elected to a committee, as a result of a staff election, while a rare occurrence, is not an Indigenous-identified position.

None of the twelve universities had identified positions for Indigenous people on their main governance committee, the university council. A better result occurred in relation to the key academic committee of the university, with eight universities identifying Indigenous positions on their academic boards. However, in relation to the human research ethics committees, which manages staff and student research in the universities—a key committee in regard to Indigenous research—just five universities had an Indigenous- identified position on these committees.

This lack of Indigenous-identified positions on the human research ethics committees demonstrates that many Australian universities are unaware of the need for universities to conduct ethical research regarding Indigenous issues, peoples and communities, a position that ignores the exploitation of Indigenous peoples by historical and contemporary university research approaches.

I also looked at the university-wide senior management structures of the selected universities. Just one of the twelve universities had an Indigenous person at the level of pro-vice chancellor or above. This position focussed on Indigenous issues.

These results replicated the poor results of the previous surveys conducted in 2000 and 2007. In these surveys, no university had an Indigenous-identified position for their university council. Just four universities in 2000 and seven in 2007 had an Indigenous- identified position on their academic board, mainly the director of the Indigenous centre. While the 2000 survey did not analyse the composition of the universities' human research ethics committees, the 2007 survey found that just four universities had an Indigenous- identified position on their ethics committee. I did not analyse the university-wide senior management structures of the twelve selected universities in the 2000 and 2007 surveys.

The involvement of Indigenous people in university committees is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Involvement of Indigenous people in university governance

	2000	**2007**	**2012**
University council	0	0	0
Academic board	4	7	8
Human research ethics committee	n/a	4	5
University-wide senior management	n/a	n/a	1

Finally, in the 2012 survey, I also examined the proximity of Indigenous centres and Indigenous advisory committees, which are the main Indigenous governance entities in most universities, to the key university governance bodies, vice-chancellors and university councils. Indigenous centres, under various names, exist in all Australian universities. The centres provide significant academic and cultural support to Indigenous students, engage with local Indigenous communities and often employ the majority of Indigenous staff in universities. However, these centres are largely under-resourced and overworked because they receive minimal support and other areas of the university view their presence as a justification to eschew their own responsibilities to also address Indigenous issues (Anderson et al. 1998: xv). Indigenous advisory committees, also under various names, exist in many Australian universities. These committees often comprise members from the local Indigenous community, senior university staff and staff from the Indigenous centres. The committees provide advice to the university regarding Indigenous issues. The 2012 survey revealed there were often several levels of bureaucracy between the Indigenous centres and Indigenous advisory committees and senior university management. On average, the number of levels between the Indigenous centre and vice chancellor was 2.1 and the average number of levels between the Indigenous advisory committee and vice chancellor or university council was 1.3. Further, only half of the twelve university websites referred to the existence of an Indigenous advisory committee.

The results of this 2012 analysis showed little improvement since the analyses conducted in 2000 and 2007. In 2000, there were 2.7 and 1.6 levels of bureaucracy between Indigenous centres and Indigenous advisory committees and senior university management, respectively. In 2007, there were 1.3 levels between Indigenous advisory committees and senior university management. I did not examine the number of levels between Indigenous centres and senior university management in 2007.

The number of levels between Indigenous centres, Indigenous advisory committees and university senior management is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Levels between Indigenous governance and university management

Indigenous governance	2000	2007	2012
Indigenous centre	2.7	n/a	2.1
Indigenous advisory committee	1.6	1.3	1.3

Conclusion

In this article, I have analysed the approaches to Indigenous leadership and governance of twelve selected Australian universities. I have examined whether the visions, aspirations, priorities and goals in these universities' strategic plans address the participation of Indigenous people in the leadership and management of universities. I have looked also at the involvement of Indigenous people in university committees, such as university councils, academic boards and human research ethics committees, and in the senior management of these universities, such as pro vice chancellors. Further, I have explored the proximity of existing Indigenous governance structures, such as Indigenous centres and Indigenous advisory committees, to senior university management.

There have been numerous reports and manuscripts from government bodies and academics published over the past two decades which have comprehensively argued that the involvement of Indigenous people in university leadership and governance is a critical factor in reducing Indigenous educational disadvantage at Australian universities. However, my analysis of the approaches within twelve selected universities to Indigenous leadership and governance illustrates that Australian universities are continuing to fail to understand the importance of this key factor to address Indigenous university educational aspirations. In addition, the comparison of this analysis conducted in 2012 with two previous studies conducted with the same sample of universities in 2000 and 2007 illustrates that there has been little, if any, improvement in the past twelve years in the approaches of Australian universities towards the engagement of Indigenous people in university leadership and governance.

Australian universities need to genuinely address the recommendations of these numerous publications and fully involve Indigenous people in the leadership and governance of universities. In this article, I have discussed some of the key strategies universities should be undertaking in regard to Indigenous leadership and governance. A university's strategic plan, a key aspiration and policy document, should articulate commitment to this area, and should also include performance indicators and targets. The strategic plans also should refer to and support other key university documents relating to Indigenous issues, including Indigenous education strategies, reconciliation statements and equity plans. Beyond the strategic plans, universities also need to have identified Indigenous positions on their key governance committees, such as university councils, academic boards and human research ethics committees, and to have at least one identified Indigenous position at the level of pro-vice chancellor or above. Further, the main Indigenous governance bodies, the Indigenous centres and Indigenous advisory committees, should be properly resourced by universities in regard to finance, staffing levels and broader university support, and should be able to report directly to the key university governance entities, the vice chancellors and university councils.

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