

Session IV: Education

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Good afternoon, everybody. It's a lovely afternoon and this is the last panel session until the wrap up. My name is Lisa. My people come from Wagga Wagga in southwestern New South Wales. I'm a Koori woman and I pay respects to the people of this land, the Gadigal of the Eora Nation, and recognise that the land that we're on has always been known, loved and nurtured. No matter where you are from across Australia, there's not a place that's not called Country and not called loved. I was asked at the last minute to not be Marcia, but I could be. I reckon the next session I'll have a go at channelling a bit of Marcia because she's got a lot to say, and I do too. But I was asked to talk about the transformative power of education, our investment as a nation in education, and take stock of that investment and how it builds a better society.

I work at a large university, my background's in public health epidemiology and everyone knows what that means nowadays. It's no longer necessary to explain. I now work as one of the Deputy Vice Chancellors at the University of Sydney. I look after the Indigenous Strategy and Services Portfolio, although I do manage to get myself involved in other significant things across the university. I want to talk specifically about one of the major levers that I've had the privilege and pleasure of being able to use in how we change the sector for good. For many, many years, decades and decades and decades, you

talk about reports, oh my god, we have got reports that are miles high that are tons worth of effort.

We write reports and then we promptly do absolutely nothing about it. We've got tomes that act as really great bricks to hold doors open. When we start looking in my own background in health, for example, in the 1970s, we had one of the best reports ever called the National Aboriginal Health Strategy. If you pulled this out today and changed the date to 2022, there would be very little difference. One of the things that I've learned since I became a health professional in the 'seventies was that the best way of making change is to get engaged and involved in the accreditation bodies. The body I'm going to talk about today is a body called Universities Australia. I know many of you know them, but I'm hoping to give you a slightly different perspective, as an Aboriginal academic, in what happens with them in my world.

It's been an evolution about how indigen-ous scholarship occurs in Australia. We've got more Aboriginal students than ever in tertiary education in the university sector and certainly more Aboriginal scholars, academics, researchers and workers in the sector. This has been evolving significantly since around about 2011, when there was a huge push towards this magic thing called "indigenization of curricula." For many people, indigenization of curricula was very

¹ This is an edited version of a transcript of the presentation.

much about putting on a selective piece of work that students could enrol in and, “be careful, we’re not going to evaluate it or do any sort of critique. But you need to enrol in this to complete your degree and off you go.” We found, quick sticks, that that didn’t really make much of a difference in people’s practice of whatever it was that they were learning in their degree.

Universities Australia provided a helpful guide called *Guiding Principles for Developing Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (2011)², thinking that that might help people do the trick. It recommended sector-wide commitments to the individualization of curriculum using sound pedagogical frameworks. That makes total sense, right? Why would you implement curricula without anything sound that framed it up pedagogically, just saying. Anyhow, they had this really marvellous quote and I’ll read it out to you: “Student and staff knowledge is an understanding of indigenous Australian cultures histories and contemporary realities and awareness of indigenous protocols combined with a proficiency to engage and work effectively indigenous contexts congruent to the expectations of indigenous Australian people.” Can someone please tell me what that really means?

No, seriously, I’m not trying to take the mickey, but it’s really hard to understand what that means and what you can do practically to implement it. I know it was a long time ago. It was 11 years ago. But at the time they were also saying: one of the ways that you can do this is to embed indigenous knowledges and perspectives in your curriculum. You can include indigenous

cultural competency and create formal graduate attributes or formal graduate qualities, which is helpful. You can incorporate indigenous Australian knowledges and perspectives into programs. You can train teaching staff in indigenous pedagogy for teaching indigenous studies and help them feel confident in so doing and, of course, create reporting mechanisms, because we’re really good at that in the academy, aren’t we? Writing reports, and standardizing and applying some sort of process of quality assurance and accountability across that curriculum. Question: who was therefore responsible for doing this?

Do you want to have a guess? Yes, absolutely, that fell on the already burdened workload of the fairly junior staff Aboriginal: to do something that in some of our universities we’ve got entire departments to do with highly qualified people that have spent half of their lives learning how to do that. Subsequent to that, Universities Australia looked at the outcomes of the sector and recognised “we need to do a little bit more.” Strategies are always evolving, especially when you’re doing something new. They went off and created some new work, and again I quote, “Universities will differ in how they approach this.” Okay, so that’s good. We’ve recognised that all of our universities are different from each other and that’s a good thing. But, more importantly, that the Aboriginal communities across the nation are different from each other and that in fact each of us have quite different circumstances.

There are some very helpful graphs on the differences between urban people and rural people and regional people, and people

² <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Guiding-Principles-for-Developing-Indigenous-Cultural-Competency-in-Australian-Universities.pdf>

who finished school at 14 versus those who finished school later and where they went to school. What they wanted to do is to make sure that we were able to develop formal graduate attributes, discrete units of study, campus and off-campus experience and other activities. The key thing that they underlined strongly was that this was to be done with local communities, “with your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.” We were to look at our respective communities for advice and guidance on how to start operationalizing the complexity of what Universities Australia wanted us to do. This is not really a session on begging them, but this is really a session about how sometimes good will can collide with the practical realities of what we need to do and how we need to do it.

Realizing that this particular advice was somewhat insufficient, Universities Australia very kindly released a good practice paper in 2019; it’s well worth the read and I would advise you to do that. One of the stated intentions of the document was to function as a resource for universities to consider in their efforts when they went about indigenizing curricula; they added a very helpful reading list of academic papers, mostly done by Aboriginal scholars, along with a nine-point list because we all love lists, right? A nine-point roadmap, if you like. It included that the university should have an indigenous graduate attribute or similar and that the course accreditation process should ensure that all courses are aligned to the achievement of this attribute. That makes total sense, right? Then they said that indigenous curricula should be coherently integrated into the degrees.

That’s not something that stands outside on its own as a special thing that people can

skip if it’s too early on a Friday morning. The appreciation or sensitivity to indigenous knowledges and that these knowledges or application of these knowledges should be assessed. We all know that assessment drives learning, right? It’s one of the most magical characteristics of my world. Teaching staff should also be sensitive to and appropriately prepared and experienced in indigenous content that they teach. This is really helpful because ultimately there are not that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people about at a sufficient level or who are qualified sufficiently to be able to teach. We’ve just learned a beautiful example of math teaching. We just don’t have enough math teachers to go around. We certainly don’t have enough Aboriginal people to implement this sort of really strong and important aspiration.

The fifth thing they wanted was that courses should include formal recognition of indigenous knowledges. And that explicitly that knowledge is relevant and endorsed by the indigenous bodies of the place where this is being taught. This is also something which is quite useful, but when you’ve got content and you’ve got course materials that can go across ... and some of our universities are very big and have multiple campuses. Sometimes what’s taught here in the city of Sydney, for example, will not work in Wagga Wagga or Orange or Broken Hill or in another jurisdiction. The guidance is helpful, but the application and implementation of that can come awry very, very quickly when, again, high intentions just cannot be met. Courses should use language which reflects the diversity in multilingual practices of indigenous Australians where possible. I’m very pleased to report that many of our tertiary institutions are now gripping up

language and starting to call courses by their right names in accordance with the local communities.

Another is: indigenous graduate attributes or other course learning outcomes may be supported and enhanced by extracurricular or co-curricular activities, but they themselves are not a substitute for formal indigenous curriculum development. We just can't be let off the hook by having someone come in and talk about culture. The course accreditation process should demonstrate that indigenous Australian stakeholders have been authentically consulted as a part of course-development processes. Now, you all know about consultation mechanisms, don't you? It's a pretty hard thing to do and it's a pretty hard thing to do authentically, and it's very, very hard to do it in a way where you actually get all of the views that you really need to have at the same table.

Then, the final one of their nine was indigenous and non-indigenous academic staff engagement in academic governance bodies and decision-making process in the universities. And it's critical that this occurs at a senior level to enhance successful indigenous curriculum development. Like I said before, this is a fantastic ideal. This is a fantastic expectation, but many of our universities and our sector as a whole have fallen absolutely short.

I'll share some data I've got with you and I don't have a beautiful slide:

- 46% of universities reported that indigenous viewpoints are considered and incorporated when designing education at their institutions. When you tease that out, the majority of that content is designed primarily by non-Aboriginal people with advice from indigenous people
- 43% of universities reported having an indigenous-specific graduate attribute. That's good
- 33% of universities describe general indigenous engagement as a process for embedding indigenous views in course content
- 31% of universities reported having indigenous content only in indigenous courses, and
- only 15% of universities reported having processes for indigenous content in both indigenous and non-indigenous courses.

The point here is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up just over 3% of the population, or we might be generous and say less than 5% of the population. The majority of our universities do not have anywhere near that number of Aboriginal students and nowhere near that number of Aboriginal staff. We are utterly and completely reliant upon the 95% of Australia's population to help us do this work. I recognise that this might sound a little bit hard and harsh because we're a fantastic sector. We're a sector that changes people's lives. We're a sector that can within a generation make a massive difference.

There were three additional points of good practice that Universities Australia did recommend at the time. They said co-design and co-creation needs to be articulated in teaching and learning plans. An introduction of a template for individualization of curriculum and indigenous content pedagogies and methodologies are to be incorporated into all non-indigenous specific courses. The current strategy has worked out and recognised that some of these aspirations are in fact not achievable at this point. Sometimes there is some

scepticism, isn't there? When you are going for a particular aim, you're going for a particular strategy and you know that chatter in your head is like, "We're never going to get there, we're not going to get 3% of our entire cohort of staff in the next four years. If we did that, then what happens to all the other organisations that are trying to get more staff?"

There is just this pragmatic realistic reason why sometimes people will go ahead and put a stamp on something and say, "Yes, let's all go for it." But in their heads, they're saying, "Eh, it's not going to happen." It's a terrible incongruence and it's absolutely palpable. If someone was saying something to you and they were, really got a dialogue going in their heads, I know that most of you would see that a mile away, right? Well, same with us. Universities Australia has now asked us to have a close look at six commitments. We keep going from nine to three to six. Here we are, with six. We're sort of in the middle of the nine to three, three to nine.

Universities have indigenous content and curricula that's meaningful, appropriately developed and appropriately resourced. This is one of the first times they've really said that we need to have resourcing behind all of this, and that makes a major difference to how it is we can go ahead with our work. Universities ensure students graduate with an awareness of indigenous values and knowledges. The benefits of indigenous-led research is recognised and promoted by the universities, that there's a robust ethics process in indigenous research with

AIATSIS guidelines and the other helpful guidelines to help us. That the value of indigenous leadership is recognised by being appropriately structured and supported and that the role of Elders and local communities be appropriately recognised and valued. These are really important and this is central to the guidance that we are receiving from our sector leads. That universities have indigenous content that is meaningful, appropriately developed and resourced. Yet the strategy is fairly silent on many of those contexts and of course it's up to us to make it happen.

The three things that I'm told that I was asked to leave with people, firstly, is to read what is expected of you. Whether you are in the tertiary education sector, whether you're in the vocational sector or another, there are these documents that are absolutely everywhere. We're running out of time to be able to do something sensible in this area. We've pushed forward the needs to be equitable in our education system, in our housing system, and in all of our structures of governance for decades and decades and decades. It was only a couple hundred years ago that the modern Australia became what it is today. But for 60,000 years people have been learning and teaching on this land and, quite frankly, we have a lot to share. One of the things that I would invite you to do is to work out how in your local world you can make sure that that can happen for us all. Uni is transformative, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make the joint better. Thank you.