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Academic students or student academics? Indigenous academics and higher degree research

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In considering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher degree completion rates in Australia, which (like Indigenous undergraduate completions) continue to be a concern, a number of explanations are offered. Such explanations identify student characteristics such as non-traditional educational backgrounds, mature age, and family and community responsibilities, in relation to whether Indigenous students are likely to successfully complete research degrees or not. Indigenous higher degree students are imagined as emerging, perhaps tentatively, from 'the community' to knock on the forbidding doors of academia. We argue that, contrary to this imagery, many such 'students' are already an integral part of the scholarly world, holding positions of considerable responsibility. Our own research reveals that those higher degree Indigenous students are often, in fact, our own academic colleagues. They are student academics (or academic students), simultaneously wearing two hats, and dealing with a correspondingly complex set of challenges. Our findings relating to academic workloads, career imperatives, and personal motivation are briefly analysed. We look forward to discussing these and related issues with other conference delegates.

Keywords: Indigenous academics, research, higher degree

Introduction

When university scholars gather to discuss and share their research on the student experience, it is usually from the logical perspective that 'we' are all academics, and 'they' are all students. The changing demographic profile of the student body in Australia is of course acknowledged, in order to take proper account of mature age entry, internationalisation, multilingual groups, religious diversity, and so on. Yet there remains a distinct sense of 'us' and 'them'. *We* have completed doctorates or other research degrees; we teach and supervise; we do research; and we contribute to the community within university walls, and beyond. Students, by definition, are not generally seen as having those roles, but as working (whether full time or part time) towards qualifications that will enable them in due course to enter the world of academia, should they so choose.

Nowhere is the us–them dichotomy more apparent than in scholarly or policy analyses of Indigenous student issues. Here the numerous longstanding and well-publicised issues in relation to Indigenous undergraduate learning and success (e.g., Bourke & Burden, 1996; DiGregorio, Farrington & Page, 2000) have tended to attract more attention than the issues relating to graduate students, including those enrolled in research higher degrees. Researchers and government analysts are now, however, noting with increasing and justifiable concern

that, while higher degree enrolments are slowly increasing, the rate of Indigenous completions remains low (IHEAC, 2008). To explain Indigenous attrition, observers routinely offer explanations relating to such students' mature age status, family responsibilities and community commitments, on top of the ongoing effects of their non-traditional educational backgrounds (*Campus Review* 20.1.09).

Who are the Indigenous 'academic students'?

Every one of these factors is highly relevant, and we do not deny their validity. However, the picture often associated with those characteristics is one where Indigenous higher degree students are emerging, perhaps tentatively, from 'the community' to knock on the forbidding doors of academia. We would argue that this imagery is belied by the fact that many such 'students' are already an integral part of the scholarly world, holding positions of considerable responsibility. As we will show in this paper, on the basis of our own research, those higher degree Indigenous students are often, in fact, our own academic colleagues. They are student academics, or academic students, simultaneously wearing two hats, and dealing with a correspondingly complex set of challenges. Like many other Indigenous students - although certainly not all - our colleagues have tended to follow non-traditional pathways into university study, often after spending some years in professional jobs within the community, or in student support positions within Indigenous centres.

What do the figures show?

We do not suggest that Indigenous academics are alone in this situation. People with diverse professional backgrounds, such as accountants or architects, often enter academic careers later in life and without research qualifications. However, the figures relating to Australian academics as a whole – and within that, to Indigenous academics as a sub-group – provide some stark contrasts. In Australia, one recent national study (Coates et al., 2008) found that over 70% of all academics in universities hold PhDs. Another study submitted to the Australian government around the same time by the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC, 2008), drawing on figures supplied by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, reported that only 15% of Indigenous academics have doctorates. The fact that so many Indigenous academics have yet to complete their research higher degrees has many repercussions, including effects on workloads in Indigenous centres; career prospects of individual academics; and the availability of supervisors to service the increasing numbers of intending Indigenous PhD candidates. We have written more comprehensively on such issues in a forthcoming book chapter (Asmar, Mercier, Ripeka & Page, in press).

There is another statistical issue; namely the simple fact that the numbers of Indigenous academics in Australian universities are extremely small to start with. Under-represented Indigenous academic populations are a post-colonial global phenomenon. In New Zealand, for example, Census data indicates that the percentage of Māori in the overall population is 14.6%, but the proportion of Māori academics in universities is only 3.6% of all academics (TEC, 2008). In Australia the proportion of Indigenous staff relative to all university staff in 2007 is a mere 0.8 percent, or 'less than a third of what it should be if population parity existed' (IHEAC, 2008). The Australian government has also been advised that to achieve parity of participation (in comparison to non-Indigenous completions), overall Indigenous doctoral completions would need to increase by 600% (IHEAC, 2008). It needs little imagination, then, to envisage the workload implications for the small number of Indigenous academics who are qualified researchers, as we shall see.

The overall theme of this conference relates to the student experience. In addressing this theme we will explore what our interviews with Indigenous academic staff have revealed about their experiences as ‘academic students’. This is an area of empirical investigation which has rarely been systematically tackled in Australia. We focus here on just two research questions: firstly, what are the key, defining characteristics of the experience of Indigenous academic staff studying for research higher degrees? And secondly, how might universities better understand and respond to those lived experiences? In this paper there is not scope to fully analyse all our findings in relation to these issues. We will therefore simply touch on some key themes from our analysis, whilst referring readers to our published papers for more detail.

Our study

Our study was funded by the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and we adhered closely to their ethical guidelines for the conduct of Indigenous research. We interviewed twenty-three male and female academics across Australia, nearly all located in Indigenous units, schools or centres (as opposed to disciplines or departments). We used the software package NVivo (version 2) to manage and interrogate the data (Bazeley, 2007). Further details of our qualitative methods and community consultation can be found in our publications. For the purposes of this paper we are focusing on responses from the twenty participants (out of a sample of 23) who made some reference to higher degree issues during the course of a wide-ranging interview. We will report briefly on the three main issues that intersected with their perceptions and/or experiences in relation to higher degrees – namely, workload, career and motivation – in that order.

Findings and discussion

Reflecting the trends in the national data, only two academics in our total sample of 23 had completed PhDs. Seven participants were enrolled in doctorates. The overall salience of the higher degree issue was reflected in the fact that 87% of our interviewees (20 out of 23) had something to say, unprompted, about higher degrees.

In speaking of higher degrees, more participants mentioned workload than any other issue. Fully half the people who raised the issue of workload were working as Directors or Acting Directors. Four of these Directors were enrolled in PhDs, with one enrolled in a Masters. Skilled and competent Indigenous academics often rise rapidly in the tertiary education hierarchy, sometimes without the research qualifications normally associated with such appointments. Like most Heads, they then find it almost impossible to find time for research, even when it is clearly a strong institutional expectation:

“You know, when the Pro-Vice-Chancellor is constantly saying: ‘Oh, it’s important that you get that PhD done.’ And gives you about 50 jobs to do that afternoon ... This is what frustrates me.” (#01)

Given the high priority placed by Indigenous academics on teaching and student support (Asmar et al., forthcoming; Page & Asmar, 2008), plus the small number of colleagues available to share teaching workloads, prioritising a higher degree can be hard:

“There’s only a certain number of us and we need to think very carefully about where we put our time and energy in relation to teaching activity; at the same time, maintaining

space for people to complete their research – which at the moment would be their qualifications.” (#19)

The next most salient issue for participants was that of career. Few had any doubt as to the desirability of obtaining higher degrees, in terms of university career imperatives. People commented on how a research degree would help in obtaining a permanent appointment; getting promoted; and/or enhancing their standing and reputation inside and outside the university:

“It was signalled to me that I would have to get a doctorate. It was suggested that you could head that faculty, but to do so you have to jump through the hoop.” (#08)

However some made the point that, while a doctorate might equip them for a career in academia, it was also a passport to success outside the university:

“Where I found it a bit limiting was that PhD was seen to equate with academic career. I don’t think most of us see it that way actually, I think most of us see a PhD as providing that possibility, but also being more essential these days to careers elsewhere.” (#12)

Given that our participants felt they had a certain amount of agency, in terms of the career choices and mobility open to them once they had completed their degrees, the next set of preoccupations related to issues of their motivation. Responses in relation to their desire to complete (or even to commence) a higher degree were mixed. Aware of the importance of completing if they wanted an academic career, some benefited greatly from having a supportive environment in which to pursue that often elusive goal:

“We’ve got a really good supportive centre... We know the pain that comes with studying and full time work, so that’s been really, really useful. If that support wasn’t there, it’d be really hard.” (#11)

Being able to work on research topics relevant to community issues was a strong motivator for some. Yet for others, it was equally important to use their academic skills for the direct benefit of Indigenous students and through them, their communities:

“I think staff in universities are socialised into thinking that [getting a higher degree] is the only option ...to sort of become someone in the university. But it just doesn’t interest me if I have to sacrifice my own social justice agenda and Aboriginality.” (#10)

Conclusions

Our focus in this short paper has been on the considerable number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics who are simultaneously students enrolled in higher degrees. This is not to overlook the growing number of Indigenous academics who have already achieved their research qualifications by hard work and with little fanfare, and who hold significant leadership roles.

Indigenous academics’ strong commitment to teaching, particularly in relation to Indigenous students, and to working for the benefit of their communities, both exert a push-pull effect on their dedication to completing higher degrees. Having a supportive research culture, appropriate supervision, and/or the option of working on research directly linked to Indigenous community, will all enhance the likelihood that the academics will complete their

candidature. At the same time, the limited availability of Indigenous expertise means that the resourcing of Indigenous teaching may continue to delay individual research degree completions.

While Indigenous academics are clear that a formal research qualification is an academic career requirement, universities would do well to realise that these individuals are highly employable outside academia too. Our participants certainly felt they had agency, in terms of the career choices and mobility open to them once they had completed their degrees.

With or without PhDs, Indigenous ‘academic students’ are a precious resource for Australian tertiary institutions. Supporting our Indigenous colleagues in moving beyond student status to fulfil their career and personal aspirations can only be a win for everyone. Responsibility for this, however, lies not just with Indigenous people or centres. If our institutions really value Indigenous staff contributions to curriculum, teaching, research and community engagement - then we will have to find more creative ways to support our Indigenous ‘academic students’ than we currently do.

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