

Enhancing success for Indigenous postgraduate students

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Significant numbers of Indigenous postgraduate students in Australia are in need of innovative research support which takes account of a range of cultural and epistemological essentials.

Universities are working on this, yet in the main we have a situation of mostly non-Indigenous supervisors adopting western scientific and cultural approaches to supervision. This takes little account of cultural diversity, community values, traditional knowledges, Indigenous research methodologies or even the personal reality of the student.

Even more significantly, supervision approaches and processes may take no account of greater work-life pressures on Indigenous postgraduate students and staff, who are predominantly academics who are women with wide educational and socio-cultural support responsibilities.

Poor recognition of educational development

Indigenous staff undertake considerable cultural and educational work outside the range of academic promotional 'service' criteria. While this is lauded by universities, it is neglected by them in work load policy calculations and promotions. As well, these multiple contributions may enhance professional satisfaction, but impede academic career development.

Commitments can include: working to achieve much needed Indigenous educational innovation within the walls of western academic institutions; serving in community and government educational support organisations of direct relevance to tertiary educational reform; direct contributions to new university policy on Indigenous educational innovation and Indigenous staff professional development; mentoring many Indigenous undergraduate students with major life, study and health challenges; providing an Indigenous presence at the university in its many functions and graduations; assessing numerous Indigenous student educational funding and scholarship programs; supporting Indigenous students in their own mentoring of other secondary and tertiary sector Indigenous students; and, outreach to enhance Indigenous student enrolments.

Personal pathway

My pathway to examining the issues of Indigenous higher degree research students at the University began with my appointment to support research training and mentoring for Indigenous postgraduate research staff and students, and to undertake research with an Indigenous focus. Undertaking the University of Sydney Development Program for Research Higher Degree Supervision, conducted by the Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL), was a means of updating my supervision skills after time in the public and agri-environment research sectors, and, of evaluating my role in postgraduate support for Indigenous students.

The course was to help with several priority issues:

- the need for the University to encourage an increase in the number of Indigenous postgraduate research students enrolling in and completing their degrees;
- the need to mentor and support postgraduate students in their own research, writing and supervision relationships.

Initial personal reflections

A key element of the Supervision Program was a reflective case study. In my case I chose to develop questions and a scholarly approach to the issue of whether postgraduate supervision and research culture development should be

different for Indigenous students. Do we need better and more non-traditional supervision strategies or not? To evaluate this question I examined my academic experiences of being a doctoral student, and of later mentoring and supervision. The ITL course necessitates introspection! To begin in a reflexive way I examined some of the concerns and contradictions that my work in a number of university contexts has raised for me:

- supporting Indigenous students undertaking higher degrees by research appeared to have a higher degree of complexity compared to non-Indigenous students;
- the need to account for the teaching impacts of a large number of Indigenous academic staff undertaking higher degrees at the same time;
- the additional pressure of community service, student mentoring, and health issues impacting on delivery of teaching and research services and professional development of Indigenous staff;
- the need to further support and develop research cultures in the University's Indigenous teaching and research units.

Motivation can be a difficult issue for higher degree students fully employed in university teaching, consulting, small research projects, and mentoring and community roles. A lengthy research commitment becomes difficult, as Hockey (1996) noted: 'The most fundamental problem encountered by supervisors related to students who displayed inadequate motivation to pursue a PhD' (p. 361). The reluctance of students to produce early written work was also noted: '...These kinds of blockages appear to have arisen out of a lack of intellectual confidence' (p. 361) and I agree. Supervisors need to work harder to promote confidence in individual researchers developing their voice. Research journals are just one tool that can assist new researchers in gaining confidence in developing their perspectives.

In Australia the majority of Indigenous academic staff within Indigenous centres have a poorer research training background than their non-Indigenous peers. This extends to the important field of support for Indigenous research training (IHEAC, 2006). Some may have a bachelors or masters degree by coursework, but less research experience. This poses challenges for academic staff trying to complete doctorates as part of their professional development in line with University policies.

Supervision and development of a stronger research culture

As part of my reflective participation in the Postgraduate Supervision Development Program it became apparent that a number of Indigenous postgraduate students (who were also staff) had not progressed well in their thesis work at many academic institutions. This could be influenced by the high demand for personal mentoring support by their Indigenous students. In addition, there may be considerable extended family support demands and significant health issues which are more prevalent in Indigenous populations at a chronic level. There appear to be a collage of issues impeding research progress, as suggested by Ives & Rowley (2005), including time conflicts with teaching and family; motivation; and supervisory support.

Research candidates without children and those without chronic illnesses tended to progress more quickly with their research, a not unusual finding for academic women in particular (Devos, 2004). One senior Indigenous academic suggested to me that the key barrier to research achievement was 'just tiredness' brought on by many of the above factors. The high levels of continuous fatigue that women experience in particular, with their concurrent roles of teacher, researcher, community educator, extended family nurturer, and mentor to Indigenous undergraduate students (who sometimes have considerable problems of their own), take their toll. Yet this is largely unaccounted for in academic human resources policies and professional development support across universities.

In research training, the University of Sydney has provided Indigenous staff with the opportunity to attend many national and specially developed research methods training workshops and seminars. Koori Centre Indigenous academic staff have an opportunity to take Special Studies Program (SSP) leave in order to complete a large component of their theses. Those supports in place have allowed two doctorates to be awarded over the past decade and recent submissions for examination of a doctorate and a research masters (Honours). Five further research theses are well underway. So it is a very encouraging prospect for the University of Sydney that there will be a number of hard won postgraduate degrees awarded over the next few years to Koori Centre staff.

Barriers to research achievement

Since working with Indigenous staff as an equity group I am convinced that the criteria for good policy and practice in supervision should embrace the following:

- focus on the development of confidence in the research process;
- encouragement to develop one's own voice;
- consideration of the applicability of Indigenous research theory and methodological options;
- facilitation of breaks from the thesis, for work and family issues, and development of a non-threatening process for return to the thesis on a positive trajectory;
- acknowledgement of the constant pressure of time allocation for family, students and community for Indigenous women in particular (Day & Davison, 2005)

I found the work of Ives and Rowley (2005) useful in affirming the most productive attributes of supervision of successful students:

- two very active supervisors;
- choice in supervisor selection;
- a good match of student interests and expertise with that of the supervisor;
- an experienced supervisor.

In comparison, students who discontinued postgraduate study had the following in common:

- only one active supervisor;
- a moderate match with supervisor speciality;
- male supervisors were at lower levels of appointment and were only moderately experienced in supervision.

Critical reflections

My observations are that the following factors are relevant to supervisors and tertiary institutions encouraging Indigenous students and staff to undertake doctoral programs:

- while there may be university pressure to undertake doctoral studies there may also be some reluctance to do so, especially for older staff members;
- lack of research training opportunities can lead to poor motivation and conceptualisation of the overall task of a research thesis, and/or an unclear understanding of the research process and what research can achieve;
- many researchers who have difficulty with progress towards a higher degree by research have immediate and constant child care responsibilities;
- poor supervision practice is not unknown: from the overly dominating and prescriptive supervisor who becomes closely involved in data generation and analysis, to the indifferent supervisor;
- postgraduate students without good supervision often seek diverse inputs to their research; this can be valuable, but students new to research can become confused by a range of often conflicting inputs from friends, colleagues and mentors as well as their supervisors;
- supervisors may need to support the student's confidence in research, in terms of both speaking and writing;
- another issue is the need to support the use of research methodologies of interest, rather than enforcing an 'alien' research methodology;
- the stress of time conflicts with teaching, research, community responsibilities, and mentoring undergraduate students can be significant;
- a number of Indigenous postgraduate students require further training in academic writing skills;
- some students are reluctant to access the plethora of mainstream institutional research support programs.

These personal reflections indicate to me that support for an Indigenous postgraduate student does often need to be different. The work of DiGregorio et al (2000) and Farrington et al (1999) at the University of Sydney shows that small projects combining groups of early career researchers have merit as an introduction to the research process. Yet this work takes considerable time and comes as a significant investment that universities are reluctant to provide. An Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Working Group's perspective suggests that Indigenous academics remain on the riverbank, the symbolic home for disenfranchised Aboriginal peoples (IHEAC Working Group, 2005).

Culture

My diverse academic roles and my case review demonstrate to me that multiple cultural isolations constitute environmental factors most significant to the doctoral research experience of many, but not all, Indigenous postgraduate students. These isolations include the physical separation of Indigenous centres from mainstream university staff on many campuses; unfamiliarity with and non-inclusion in mainstream postgraduate research training programs; as well as poorly supported networking and mentoring programs within academe. Further issues include: problematic supervisor relationships where students are reluctant to speak out; available time to

promote continuity with the research and complete the thesis; few mentors to talk with about the thesis and supervision relationship; and, difficulty with the research methodology chosen. Certainly some of these issues are experienced by postgraduate researchers in general.

Community obligations, university cultural activities, work on unpaid educational community boards, and participation in private philanthropy/state government education initiatives for Indigenous researchers, all take significant academic and personal time commitment. For these women (in the main), their social, cultural and academic lives are highly integrated with the communities they serve as educators.

New approach to the PhD

Even today Indigenous academics often engage in postgraduate research programs that are difficult to pursue with the additional academic, teaching, administration and community responsibilities that surround them.

As my external reviewer, a supervisor and mentor of Indigenous postgraduate students, has said regarding student withdrawal from candidature:

Part of my role was to support Indigenous staff gain higher degrees. Only one staff member is currently enrolled and a number have let their enrolments lapse, despite initial meetings where we came up with feasible research topics. The pressures on these staff are enormous.

Often a postgraduate research project ends up piecemeal, fitted around work commitments. One way to view this would be that parcels of work could be completed in the way of traditional scientific methods applied to social or physical science research. This appears to tie in to Brew's (2001) characterisation of a more linear and compartmentalised research approach which she termed a 'domino variation'.

The problem with an atomised approach to the traditional formulaic doctorate or research masters degree, is that there may be little opportunity for an Indigenous researcher to explore Indigenous research methodologies. This may be reinforced by having non-Indigenous supervisors. The very few Indigenous supervisors are usually heavily committed, as my external reviewer suggests:

She.... has little time for active supervision due to over commitment and the pressure of being the only available Indigenous supervisor.

Ripple impacts of poor health

It would appear that in some university Indigenous teaching and research units, poor health issues can create wider negative impacts. Such impacts include other Indigenous staff having to undertake additional teaching loads and also curtailing their own work on higher degree research due to extra teaching or temporary promotion to acting roles. This serves to reduce the postgraduate progress of all staff involved. My reviewer also gave her experience:

With my Indigenous students health is a huge issue. One had triple bypass surgery in the first few months of candidature last year. and I have just visited my most active and enthusiastic student in hospital after emergency surgery. Both are women in their early forties with huge family and community responsibilities.

Recurrent illness in the university environment can lead to:

- reluctance to enrol in higher degrees given the long term time commitment;
- slower progress with the research, especially the writing;
- temporary withdrawal from a thesis; or
- permanent withdrawal.

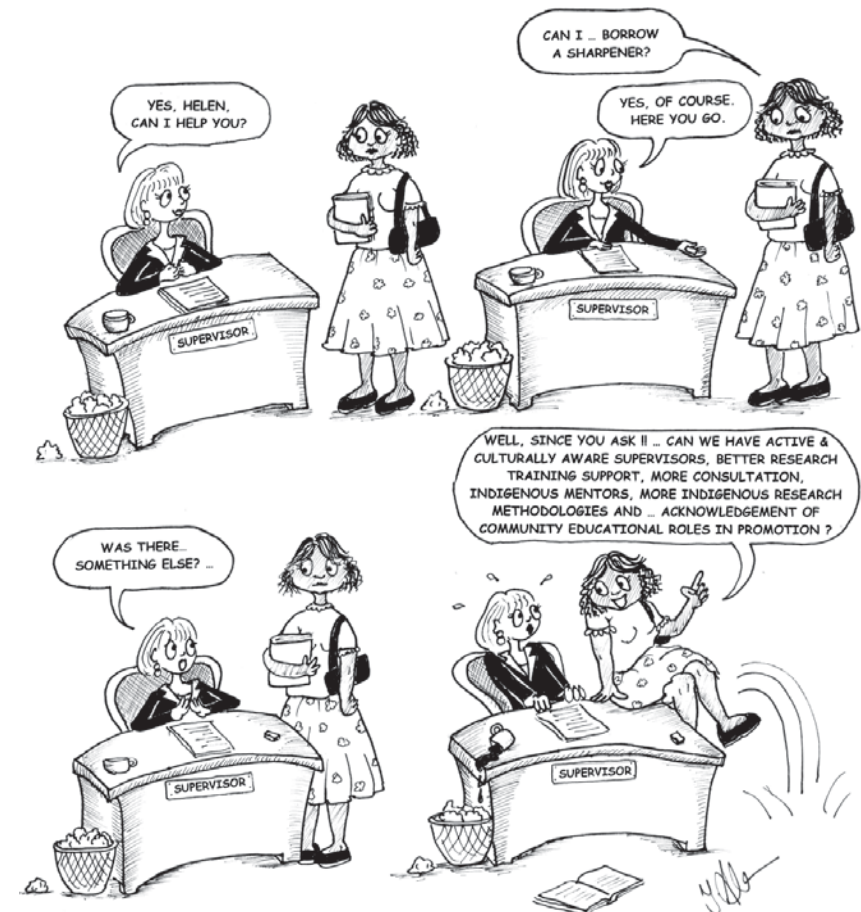
These issues may be compounded with poor supervision practice by uninterested supervisors, or even by popular supervisors who have so many students they find it difficult to provide additional support. Non-Indigenous supervisors can be unaware of the range of research training needs of some

Indigenous postgraduate students and may remain unclear of student concerns, especially when some Indigenous students may be reluctant to discuss them.

Advancing successful postgraduate outcomes

Different support

Significant numbers of Indigenous postgraduate students need further and different research support. This may vary between regional and metropolitan university contexts and with the fields of research. Some universities are attempting this through providing research support such as at the University of Sydney and Southern Cross University; through an Indigenous postgraduate training week held at the University of Melbourne; and through Indigenous theory and practice training for Indigenous



postgraduates at Southern Cross University. Yet there is a long way to go in promoting an Indigenous postgraduate culture attractive to new students (Yosso, 2006).

Supervisor cultural awareness and training

Non-Indigenous supervisors should have good experience of Indigenous cultural issues, especially an understanding of broad health, welfare and educational issues for Indigenous communities. If the aim of the Indigenous student is to research with Indigenous communities and develop Indigenous research theory, then an Indigenous supervisor might be beneficial. It would be further useful to have a national listing of suitably qualified and available Indigenous postgraduate research supervisors and research mentors.

An atomised approach to the traditional research degree allows little opportunity for an Indigenous scholar to explore Indigenous research methodologies.

The choice of supervisor is critical for the Indigenous postgraduate student who might have major coursework qualifications but limited research training. Supervisors should encourage research training; review with the student the complexity of the doctoral research task to completion; be available for regular support; be able to structure the supervisory relationship purposefully and collaboratively; and, especially, provide personal contacts to Indigenous and non-Indigenous academic mentors (Thomas, Willis & Davis, 2007).

Dedicated university counselling and professional career development support

Indigenous postgraduate students should be personally offered the normal university research support array as part of the postgraduate program. It is helpful for supervisors and mentors to reaffirm that these resources are available for Indigenous students as well.

Universities should encourage provision of career-life balance and broader professional development support and workshops for Indigenous postgraduate students. This support needs to be reaffirmed and made inclusive in a culturally appropriate context, such as including inspiring Indigenous faculty in leadership and research training.

Career support may be needed regarding choice in decisions about enrolment in a higher degree by research for the current generation of Indigenous academics. Career and professional development advice and support would balance university pressures and policy directives.

Widen postgraduate networks of formal support

Indigenous research students and staff may be isolated in their research field when based in physically separate and small Indigenous teaching and research units on university campuses. These candidates should be included in PhD research train-

ing programs in other faculties or disciplines, if necessary, to gain exposure to other research students and to gain research training support.

Students should be encouraged by their supervisors and mentors to seek inclusion in shared campus postgraduate support programs or workshops. Stating the availability of a workshop or group is not enough. Supervisors may need to facilitate the active involvement of some students.

Research training program review

As for all new doctoral students, a research training program review for Indigenous students is essential. The dimensions of the research task need to be clear to both student and supervisor (Nightingale, 2005). Especially important for students with little formal research training is a realistic thesis plan, appropriate research methodology training, time and project management training, regular progress meetings and early written work submissions. Often these strategic processes and supports do not occur.

Cultural affirmation of voice

Confidence and motivation are factors that have great impact on the development of voice and the ability to question others and to be creative with research. Motivation over the postgraduate degree is a fundamental issue for students (Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 2004). Yet how can we motivate Indigenous students with often traditional western research experiences and research methodologies which do not resonate with their cultural experiences or values? (Moeke-Pickering et al, 2006).

One consideration is support by the higher education sector of 'Indigenous doctorates' or doctorates embracing new research methodologies and knowledges including those involving multiple community participants. While most Australian universities provide Indigenous educational support there seems little motivation or understanding of how to bring Indigenous knowledges across the faculties or even supporting Indigenous research paradigms which are already used throughout the world (Smith, 1999).

Allowing more time out but supporting rapid progress on re-entry

Can there be more flexibility in structuring postgraduate research for the Indigenous academic researcher? Perhaps the doctoral process might be broken up into discrete elements that are more easily approached and completed. This would be the 'domino' type of research experience noted by Brew (2001) but it might also lead to new research approaches relating to Brew's 'journey' variation whereby such a research journey is compatible with the acute challenges for some Indigenous students. Students are ready for new non-assimilative doctoral structures and approaches in research that move away from the traditional.

Stronger research environments

Postgraduate students certainly benefit from being within a strong active research environment and meeting others on the same path (Denholm & Evans, 2006). In the contemporary university it is vital that the Indigenous postgraduate researcher, who may be quite administratively and physically isolated on campus, is encouraged to interact with other postgraduate students and senior researchers. Working with research mentors is one way this process can begin.

Supervision of many Indigenous postgraduate students, who often have full academic loads of their own, must be dedicated and active. The supervision may need to account for additional cultural and administrative demands; diverse research training programs (from handling qualitative data to academic thesis writing); extended community obligations; and time out. More intensive support for a quick trajectory back to postgraduate studies is an overlooked essential. Exposure of early career Indigenous researchers to successful Indigenous academics is fundamental to an enhanced richness of diversity, of both Indigenous researchers and of the research agenda.

Conclusions

My case study reflections suggest that Indigenous postgraduate supervision issues have specific themes and certain differences from the more 'traditional' supervision models. Many Indigenous academic staff and postgraduate students are from diverse life and learning experiences. They come from a range of regional, remote and urban communities and may need additional research training and supervision support. This is resource and time intensive, but such investments can result in wins not only for the successful students but in the development of new intellectual traditions, research methodologies and teaching and learning practices.

Universities are encouraged to further invest in Indigenous student postgraduate research training and career development by enabling those involved to contribute to the design of policy and program development. Universities must also recognise the dire impact of reduced health status or chronic illnesses in Australian Aboriginal communities and that such health issues do not escape Indigenous university staff - or students - and their extended families. Recurrent health issues can have direct and significant impacts on the academic development of Indigenous academic staff.

Indigenous staff also make significant, often unknown and unmeasured contributions to the wellbeing of Indigenous students and to Indigenous community education. Staff should be encouraged to codify such contributions into performance and promotional assessments. Non-Indigenous supervisors of Indigenous students are encouraged to learn more about Australian Indigenous cultural and educational issues as part of their supervisory relationships.

Support for Indigenous education at the University of Sydney can be viewed at www.usyd.edu.au/learning/governance/ieac.shtml, the Koori Centre www.koori.usyd.edu.au, and Yoorang Garang <http://www3.fhs.usyd.edu.au/yg>

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