

## Forging an indigenous intelligentsia

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Aboriginal students aren't getting enough opportunities. We need more indigenous academics in Australian universities.

Indigenous academics are role models and provide positive leadership for younger students. They also have the capacity to address difficult questions with rigour and cultural sensitivity.

To build a robust society and economy, we need programs to support the growth of an indigenous intellectual elite. This intellectual elite will help governments and other agencies to develop evidence-based policies on issues such as violence, including family violence, alcohol and substance abuse, suicide, unemployment and community development. We need evidence about what works so we can implement sustainable solutions.

Indigenous students need targeted support to enable them to enrol in postgraduate degrees and complete these degrees.

Currently indigenous students comprise less than 1.4 per cent of the total higher degree research enrolments in Australia and only 0.55 per cent of the completions.

The poor completion rate points to the need for universities to improve their game. New Zealand has had greater success with Maori PhD graduates. One reason is that it has invested in the development of collaborative programs where several universities work together to provide Maori students with appropriate support, recognising this cohort of students face unique barriers before and during their doctoral research. The first hurdle all PhD students face is obtaining financial support. Each university has only a limited number of scholarships, so PhD scholarships are fiercely competitive.

Unlike non-indigenous students who may undertake their PhD with or without a scholarship, most indigenous students cannot start a PhD without a scholarship.

Indigenous students who undertake postgraduate studies are typically mature age, many with family obligations. A scholarship is an essential requirement for them to undertake a PhD. Without financial

support, **indigenous** students must abandon their dream of becoming a leader in their chosen academic field.

Most universities provide PhD scholarships that are based purely on merit. Under this system, many **indigenous** students miss out, some by only a few points. A merit-based approach fails to address the unlevel playing field in access to education.

**Indigenous** students are disadvantaged when competing for PhD scholarships because of their prior educational opportunities. Those who went to school in rural and remote areas do not have access to the same opportunities as those who attended high schools in capital cities.

The **inequity** in educational opportunities results in many **indigenous** students playing educational catch-up during their tertiary studies.

To address this inequity, universities need to provide PhD scholarships that recognise both merit and prior educational opportunity.

**Indigenous** students who are successful in getting a scholarship are then faced with barriers when they begin their PhDs, the most common being social isolation, lack of prior research training and inadequate PhD supervision.

At any university, the cohort of **indigenous** students is relatively small and often spread across the whole institution.

Many students have left their community, often travelling large distances. They may be the only person from their community to be studying at university. Without knowing any other students, or having friends living in the city, they may have difficulty building a social network.

If universities are to build better programs, they will need to bring together students from a range of disciplines. An **indigenous** student undertaking a PhD in mathematics, for example, needs opportunities to meet other **indigenous** students studying anthropology, philosophy and medicine. Although their research interests are different, their family and cultural obligations are often similar.

Universities need to provide spaces in which **indigenous** students can discuss issues and share ideas about what it means for them to be **indigenous** and part of an intellectual elite.

Many **indigenous** students do not receive adequate research training during their undergraduate degrees. Rather than provide catch-up

research training in an ad hoc manner, it is more efficient to deliver the required training to groups of PhD students.

The University of Melbourne's graduate certificate in **indigenous** research leadership runs in parallel with PhD studies. It brings together **indigenous** PhD students to develop social connections and provide research training. It also provides training for non-**indigenous** supervisors, recognising that specific skills and knowledge is required to provide adequate supervision for an **indigenous** student. For example, supervisors require specific expertise when **indigenous** students undertake fieldwork and use **indigenous** methodologies.

Reform of the research training system should focus on increasing the number of **indigenous** students undertaking PhDs and supporting them to complete their degrees. This requires increased access to scholarships, improved research training and skilled supervision.

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