

WHITENESS, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

In this article, I explore the impact of whiteness within Australian universities upon Indigenous peoples. I examine several practices of whiteness in areas such as governance, policies, cultural awareness courses, employment, research, curriculum and student support. I argue that these practices of whiteness substantially restrict the ability of universities to genuinely address the educational needs of Indigenous students, staff and community members.

Whiteness involves the marginalisation, discrimination and oppression of non-white groups and individuals and the privileging of white groups and individuals. "Although whiteness is a complex and fragmented identity, all white people in Australia benefit from racial privilege ... all receive unearned social benefits as the inheritors of a racially based system of wealth and privilege" (McKay 2004: 4. See also Moreton-Robinson 2004; Nicoll 2004). In Australian universities, as in all other institutions in this country, systemic individual and institutional practices of whiteness are prevalent and impact significantly upon Indigenous peoples, whether as students, staff or community members. "Whiteness confers both dominance and privilege; it is embedded in Australia's institutions and in the social practices of everyday life" (Moreton-Robinson 1998: 11; Moreton-Robinson 2006: 388).

In this article, I explore a number of practices of whiteness within Australian universities and the impact of these practices upon Indigenous peoples. I discuss these practices of whiteness as they operate across a wide range of interrelated University areas, namely governance, policies, cultural awareness courses, employment, research, curriculum and student support. These areas have been constantly identified over the past twenty years by government reports and academics as being of critical importance in enabling Australian universities to more appropriately address the educational needs of Indigenous peoples (See DEET 1993; IEHAC 2006; MCEETYA 1995; Yunupingu 1994; Battiste and Henderson 2000; Bourke 1996; Nakata 1995; Phillips 2005; West 1995). Many of these practices of whiteness, both individual and institutional, have either been observed by me, or communicated to me by university students and staff, over the past decade of my employment at Indigenous Studies Centres at several Australian universities. I argue in this paper that Australian universities have largely been unsuccessful in addressing these, and other, practices of whiteness and have consequently substantially failed to genuinely address the educational needs of Indigenous peoples. Further, I discuss various strategies that Universities could implement that could significantly assist in reducing these practices of whiteness.

Most universities have comprehensively failed to address issues of Indigenous governance. In 2007, a survey I

conducted of twelve universities (Gunstone 2008) found that universities had very few identified Indigenous positions on key University committees. No university had an identified position on their Council, only seven had an identified position on their Academic Board, and just four had an identified position on their Human Research Ethics Committees (Gunstone 2008: 104). Additionally, while I have observed a few university committees with Indigenous members, overwhelmingly these members have been elected as individuals by university staff, rather than being appointed as representatives of Indigenous Studies Centres. The consequence of this has been that even these university committees do not maintain Indigenous representation as the membership is based on individuals rather than on institutions.

Universities need to recognise this disempowerment of Indigenous peoples and genuinely address issues of power and governance to more appropriately meet Indigenous educational needs and aspirations (IHAEC 2006: 25; Whatman and Duncan 2005: 120-123). Indigenous people need to be much more involved in university governance. This involvement of Indigenous staff, students and communities can significantly improve a number of key areas, such as curriculum development, access and retention of Indigenous students, university-Indigenous collaborative research and, more broadly, Indigenous self-determination. The level of this Indigenous involvement and engagement in university governance, though, needs to be determined by Indigenous peoples themselves.

There are many examples of ignorant and racist views towards Indigenous peoples held by white university staff and students. White academics often

perpetuate stereotypes, telling students that Indigenous children will not look them in the eye and that Indigenous people are not punctual. These academics also often hold simplistic views on cultural differences in learning, such as that Indigenous cultures lack mathematical understandings (Nakata 2003: 9). White staff have also advised students not to study Indigenous Studies unless they wanted to work in the Northern Territory, "where the Aborigines live". White academics generally fail to acknowledge Indigenous cultural issues regarding student assessment. These academics also largely assume that Indigenous students will be experts in all matters concerning Indigenous Studies. However, they also fail to recognise and value the broad Indigenous knowledge of Indigenous students (Nakata, Nakata and Chin 2008: 138).

Often the most substantial attacks on Indigenous cultural safety come from "well-meaning" white university staff and students. One example of this occurred when a white academic requested, within a large class setting, for any Indigenous students to identify themselves and then interrogated the students about their Indigeneity. Another example occurred when, again in a large class setting, a white academic identified an Indigenous student, and asked them to stand up so the class could acknowledge the student. In the same class, an Indigenous student of fair complexion was not identified by the academic as being Indigenous. Both academics later claimed that they were trying to "encourage" the Indigenous students.

These examples clearly illustrate that universities have largely not prioritised the need to address issues of individual and institutional racism. There are two key ways in which universities could address racism, through implementing

anti-racist policies and procedures and through implementing anti-racist training.

Universities have largely failed to implement anti-racist policies and procedures. In my 2007 survey on Australian universities (Gunstone 2008) I analysed the Strategic Plans of the twelve institutions, which outline their key policies, priorities and strategies, such as developing internationalisation and securing funding. None of the twelve surveyed universities outlined in their Strategic Plans the importance of anti-racist policies and procedures to address individual and institutional racism. Over many years in working at Indigenous Studies Centres, I have seen that the absence of these policies and procedures have made it much more difficult for Indigenous staff, students and community members to ensure that universities genuinely address their experiences of institutional and individual racism.

Universities need to ensure that they have effective policies and procedures to address issues of individual and institutional racism. One significant way in which this can be done is for universities to firstly, implement, and widely advertise, policies that condemn all forms of racism, and secondly, develop institutional procedures to address any instances of racism. These anti-racist policies and procedures are most effective when they acknowledge their own origins, explore injustices in terms of "oppression" rather than "disadvantage", characterise non-white individuals and groups as "fighting" against oppression rather than "suffering" it, and focus more on "fighting oppression" than on "issues of access and participation" (Moore 1995).

Universities have also comprehensively failed to address the need for their staff

and students to develop appropriate anti-racist training. Overwhelmingly, the training offered to staff and students focuses on exploring non-white cultures and experiences and ignores or marginalises the impact of practices of whiteness within universities. The training also largely fails to interrogate complex concepts such as "culture", "power", "language" and "identity" (See Delpit 1993: 122; Henze and Vanett 1993: 119-127). Universities also generally fail to make the training compulsory which often results in the training "preaching to the converted" rather than to ignorant and apathetic staff and students. I have been involved in the organising of anti-racist training and the impact of this training, despite excellent content, is substantially diluted because university management have not made the training compulsory. This practice sharply contrasts with universities often requiring staff to attend other forms of training relating to issues such as Occupational Health and Safety and Staff Inductions.

Genuine and appropriate anti-racist training for university staff and students, that addresses individual and institutional racism, requires a much broader focus than simply exploring non-white cultures. Rather, the training should also analyse the dominant white culture, and the racism, power and practices of whiteness that permeate throughout the structures and institutions of that dominant culture (Cowlshaw 2004; Pease 2004: 125; Phillips 2005: 15-19). To emphasise this focus, Fredericks (2007) argues training should be renamed from simply "cultural awareness courses" to explicit "anti-racism courses".

Another key practice of whiteness that universities have largely failed to address is the issue of Indigenous employment. Indigenous peoples are employed in significantly low numbers by universities,

and the substantial majority of Indigenous people who are employed at universities are employed within the Indigenous Centres and Departments of the universities (IHEAC 2006: 24; Moreton-Robinson 1999: 5). Further, many universities fail to acknowledge that Aboriginality is a genuine employment criteria for many academic and general staff positions. The impact of this failure by many universities to have genuine affirmative action employment practices is that non-Indigenous people are often appointed to academic and general staff positions that should be reserved for Indigenous people. I have also observed numerous examples of universities failing to support their Indigenous staff, such as not acknowledging the cultural and academic discipline knowledge of Indigenous staff in performance and promotion reviews and not recognising the substantial and invaluable community involvement work of Indigenous staff in Workloads policies.

Indigenous employment at universities needs to be addressed through several key strategies. These strategies are: first, the overall numbers of Indigenous people employed within universities needs to be increased; second, Indigenous people need to be employed in senior management roles; and third, the range of employment roles of Indigenous staff employed at universities needs to be broadened (IHEAC 2006: 24; Yunupingu 1994: 15). Further, Universities need to genuinely support their Indigenous staff, particularly regarding cultural safety issues (Young 2004: 111; Moreton-Robinson 2007: 86).

Research is another area in which universities are failing Indigenous peoples and communities. The majority of universities do not recognise the importance of negotiating more

appropriate engagements with Indigenous peoples, organisations and communities regarding research. Further, universities largely continue to conduct research concerning Indigenous issues without appropriately negotiating with Indigenous peoples and communities concerning the research (Smith 2004: 129). I have observed many white academics develop research projects concerning Indigenous issues with a complete absence of negotiations with Indigenous researchers concerning the project. Alternatively, I have also seen many other white academics involve Indigenous researchers in their research project, predominantly to obtain funding, and, upon obtaining funds, consequently largely marginalise the Indigenous researchers from further involvement in the research project.

Universities need to genuinely negotiate with Indigenous peoples, organisations and communities regarding the appropriate level of Indigenous engagement with university research concerning Indigenous knowledge and issues. Possible engagements include: negotiating research concerning Indigenous peoples; utilising Indigenous research methodologies, such as Indigenous Standpoint Theory; challenging non-Indigenous research methodologies; developing mechanisms for assisting Indigenous researchers; addressing the relationships between research and other issues such as governance, teaching, curriculum and employment; and promoting ethical Indigenous research (Battiste and Henderson 2000: 141-144; Foley 2008: 128-132; Nakata 2006: 271-272; Moreton-Robinson 2003: 84).

Universities have also largely failed to implement curriculum that is embedded with Indigenous knowledge and issues. This lack of Indigenous curriculum

substantially restricts the relevance of universities for Indigenous peoples. Rather, Indigenous peoples are often confronted with numerous individual and institutional practices of whiteness through "commonsense" curriculum that largely excludes their cultural and academic knowledge. Further, over the past ten years, I have been involved and have observed numerous attempts to implement Indigenous curriculum. These attempts are very often met with substantial resistance from white academics who are often very "territorial" about their particular teaching area (Nakata, Nakata and Chin 2008: 141).

Universities need to genuinely negotiate with Indigenous peoples concerning the appropriate approach of Indigenous engagement with curriculum development throughout the University. One approach could be for compulsory Indigenous curriculum to be implemented, under Indigenous governance, across all disciplinary areas of the university (Battiste and Henderson 2000: 92-96; Lampert 2005: 94-96). The few projects that have succeeded in recent years in implementing Indigenous curriculum in universities have all had genuine Indigenous governance (see Phillips 2004; Phillips and Whatman 2007). Universities also need to negotiate with Indigenous peoples concerning the appropriate manner of assessing this curriculum (Christensen and Lilley 1997: xiii).

Universities have also failed to broadly address issues of academic and cultural support for Indigenous students. Apart from the overworked and under-resourced Indigenous Centres and Departments, nearly all other elements of the universities provide minimal support for Indigenous students (Anderson et al 1998: xv). Further, universities often use the existence of

Indigenous Centres, notwithstanding the lack of personnel and financial resources of the Centres, as an excuse to abrogate their responsibilities to Indigenous students. For instance, I have often observed that universities have funded awareness programs for marginalised groups, but have excluded Indigenous peoples from these programs, arguing this is the responsibility of Indigenous Centres and thus ignoring possible engagements with Indigenous Centres concerning the programs. Further, this approach enables universities to then blame Indigenous Centres for low Indigenous enrolments and completions (see Nakata 2004: 2).

Universities need to provide substantial academic, cultural and personal support to Indigenous students across all areas of the institutions (Craven et al 2005: 26, 31; IHEAC 2006: 16-17, 20-21). Universities should also provide significantly more funding to Indigenous Centres and Departments, who for too long have often had to rely upon targeted Commonwealth Government funding to continue their operations. Universities should recognise the significant work that these Indigenous Centres undertake. Mainly staffed and managed by Indigenous people, the Centres have substantially assisted Indigenous people, first in enabling Indigenous people to access university courses, and second in providing academic, cultural and personal support to Indigenous students.

A number of practices of whiteness within universities that significantly impact upon Indigenous people have been discussed in this article. These practises permeate throughout a number of interrelated key areas of universities. These areas are governance, policies, cultural awareness courses, employment, research, curriculum and student

support and have been identified for over two decades by numerous government reports and academic papers as being important areas for universities to address the educational needs of Indigenous peoples.

Many of the practices of whiteness discussed in this paper, both individual and institutional, have occurred and been communicated to me during my employment at Indigenous Studies Centres at several Australian universities over the past decade. All these practices clearly illustrate the impact of whiteness upon Indigenous peoples. Indigenous staff, students and communities are marginalised and oppressed. Non-Indigenous staff and students are instead privileged and advantaged.

Further, some of the examples of individual practices have occurred despite the instigator having genuinely supportive intentions. For instance, the academic who asked the Indigenous student to stand up in class thought they were helping to improve the self-esteem of the student. Thus, motivation seems to be a minor contribution to the development of individual practices of whiteness. Rather, these practices seem to have emanated from non-Indigenous staff and students who were firstly, substantially ignorant of Indigenous issues and the impact of whiteness and secondly, hold outdated and incorrect views, such as cultural deprivation, romanticism, learning styles and "two-worlds" learning.

Overall in this article, I have argued that Australian universities have largely been unsuccessful in addressing these, and other, practices of whiteness and have consequently substantially failed to address the educational needs of Indigenous peoples. Further, I argued that universities need to consult and

negotiate with Indigenous staff, students and communities concerning these practices of whiteness. Only through such a process can Australian universities address the key areas such as governance, employment and research and ensure that universities for the first time become genuinely responsive to the educational aspirations of Indigenous peoples.

Author Note

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