

Is there Cultural Safety in Australian Universities?

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Abstract

This paper examines the cultural safety offered to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within their university environments. In the context of this paper, cultural safety includes cultural competency, as recently subscribed by Universities Australia, and ‘extends beyond (to) cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity’ (Bin Sellik, 2003, p. 210) and includes putting in place explicit measures to address racism of all types.

Informing this study were interviews and an online survey conducted with Aboriginal students and staff members of Aboriginal centres which formed part of a larger study investigating the *Transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students into Higher Education* (Oliver et al., 2013a; 2013b). Their responses provided evidence suggesting overt and covert experiences of racism, exclusion and cultural isolation indicating that there is still much to be done before cultural safety is truly attained in our universities. As such our findings support recommendations stemming from previous research indicating that cultural safety is an issue that needs to be brought to the attention of governing bodies within our higher education sector.

Keywords: Aboriginal culture, University culture, Student experience, Stereotypy, Transition

1. Introduction

In this paper we raise the controversial issue of cultural safety in Australian universities, a concept first developed in 1989 in Aotearoa/New Zealand in a project aimed at improving nursing education (Nursing Council of New Zealand, 2011). It has now been widely included in numerous health care education programs in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Canada and beyond.

Cultural safety involves an understanding that although we all belong to a culture, unequal power relations exist within and between cultural groups, and do so at all levels: at the individual, family, community and societal levels. This presents us with the challenge of developing awareness of and addressing existing cultural inequities in ‘safe ways’. Although we acknowledge and do have evidence of Aboriginal students’ comfortable and successful transition into higher education, in this paper we will focus on whether or not the frequent reports in our data of discomfort suggest there is a lack of cultural safety in our higher education system.

Experiencing a lack of cultural safety means experiencing ‘any actions which diminish, demean or disempower the cultural identity and well-being of an individual’ (Nursing Council of New Zealand, 2005, p. 4). However, one criticism of research and subsequent intervention in this area has been its focus on the individual (Richardson, Williams, Finlay, & Farrell, 2009, p. 27), and the failure to address the societal dimension ‘for example by examining the effects of institutional racism’ (Polaschek 1998, p. 454). Instead we argue, as does Polaschek (1998, p. 453), that cultural safety should involve recognizing the ‘negative attitudes and stereotyping of individuals because of the ethnic group to which they belong’ in a wider context, and in this case, we argue that this should occur in the teaching and learning environment of universities. First, however, it is necessary to determine precisely which issues need to be addressed in order for cultural safety to be successfully achieved.

2. Aboriginal students and lack of cultural safety

In Australian universities a lack of cultural safety seems to exist for variety of people who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (see for example Rochecouste, Oliver, Mulligan & Martin, 2010), and potentially

it is particularly the case for Aboriginal students. To some degree, this has been acknowledged within the higher education sector by improving cultural competency through developing:

Student and staff knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australian cultures, histories and contemporary realities and awareness of Indigenous protocols, combined with the proficiency to engage and work effectively in Indigenous contexts congruent to the expectations of Indigenous Australian peoples' and that this should extend 'throughout the organisational fabric of institutions and extending to every staff member and student (Universities Australia, 2011, p. 7).

There is no doubt that developing cultural competency is an essential first step to achieving cultural safety, however, more explicit steps are required. Evidence from those experiencing a lack of cultural safety can provide valuable information about the form these steps need to take. It is the intention of this paper to provide evidence in this direction.

To date reports of overt racial discrimination have featured highly in a number of investigations of Aboriginal students' experience in Australian universities. Other less obvious breaches of cultural safety have also been described. For example, using evidence from Aboriginal staff and students within a law faculty, Rogers-Falk (2012) claims that:

Most ATSI (Note 1) students and/or staff experience discrimination in one form or another almost weekly within the university environment. For example, a survey undertaken in 2007 as part of the author's PhD study indicate that 77% of ATSI law students interviewed at University experienced cultural disrespect and/or racism from staff and/or students in the law school throughout their studies. (Note 2) (Rogers-Falk, 2012, p. 2).

The consequence of repeated experiences of racism and stereotyping, claims Roger-Falk, are high levels of Aboriginal student attrition. Similarly, Osborne and Walker (2006) identify the presence of 'stereotype threat' (after Steele, 1997) which 'stigmatises students...as more educationally needy' (Osborne & Walker, 2006, p. 567) with the consequence that they are unable to identify with university and seek withdraw from their studies.

While racism may be explicit and emanating from lecturers or other students, it may also take more covert forms. For instance, it may be implicit occurring in the form of cultural insensitivities, which sadly seem to be pervasive in academia. Indeed, Sonn, Bishop and Humphries (2000) indicate that some 44% of Aboriginal student participants in their study reported experiencing cultural insensitivity such as 'a lack of awareness about Aboriginal issues' or ethnocentric attitudes to content (p. 131). In contrast, only 14% had been confronted with face-to-face racism.

Of equal concern for some Aboriginal students is the ongoing academic (mis)interpretation of Aboriginal history and experience through western perspectives. This concern was raised several times in interviews and in the online survey in our study. M. Nakata, V. Nakata, & Chin (2008) note that the use of 'western academic discourse and paradigms often fail to capture understandings of Indigenous issues, as students or the Indigenous community experiences them'(Nakata et al., 2008, p. 140). Likewise Aboriginal students are concerned by the lack of effort to include in course content alternative perspectives, such as those that Aboriginal students bring with them to the learning environment:

This 'Indigenous' knowledge may simply mean 'experience' of the world as an Indigenous person, it may mean historical understanding passed down from the Indigenous perspective, it may mean local knowledge, or community-based experience, or traditional knowledge, all of which are not well-represented in course content, if at all (Nakata et al., 2008, p. 138).

In the face of this lack of inclusion of Indigenous perspectives, Aboriginal students often need to learn a different set of skills to enable them to negotiate the 'cultural interface' of Western academic interpretations and understandings, and Aboriginal knowledge (Nakata, 2007; Nakata et al., 2008, p. 138).

However, the responsibility does not just rest with the students themselves. To this end, it is not surprising that recognising and including Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives and ensuring that non-Aboriginal tertiary educators undertake cultural competency training are two objectives of the *National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (Universities Australia, 2011). This framework promotes a system-wide approach to making Australian universities a place where Indigenous learners can 'thrive and feel at home' (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008, p. 7). Whether or not this is occurring, and is successful, is the focus of our current research.

Another area of concern amongst Aboriginal students and staff members is the stereotyping that occurs in relation to the identification of interests, knowledge and the specific learning styles of Aboriginal students. Boulton-Lewis, Marton, Lewis and Wilson (2004), for example, suggest that Aboriginal tertiary students use only strategies that promote surface level learning such as ‘focusing on words and isolated facts, routine memorising, and learning enough just to pass’. However, according to Anderson (2000) such claims should be treated warily as they ‘effectively stereotype Aboriginals and also do not take into account the social, political and historical aspects of society’ (p. 38). For example, in contrast to the claims of Boulton-Lewis et al (2004), Dudgeon and Fielder (2006, p. 2) suggest that most Aboriginal students do engage in deep level learning, for example, they are ‘critical readers – even if this is simply a reactionary response rather than critically reflective’. They further suggest that this occurs because Aboriginal learners ‘have had to, and need to continue to be, because so much has been written about Indigenous people and culture that is demeaning or fallacious’ (p. 397). Similarly Malcolm, Rochecouste and Hayes (2002) suggest that the adult Aboriginal Bachelor of Education students participating in their study had already adopted Toohey’s (1999) ‘socially critical approach’ (see Toohey, 1999, p. 63-66) to learning and are ‘often only too well aware of non-Aboriginal historical and cultural impact on their society’ (Malcolm et al., 2002, p. 12). Indeed ‘awareness of one’s social context and that of non-Aboriginal people is often the motivation for coming to university in the first place’ (Malcolm et al., 2002 p. 12).

In terms of learning styles, despite common belief to the contrary, there is now a body of research which suggests that the ways people learn are as much governed by individual differences as they are by Aboriginality (Note 3). Malcolm, et al (2002) describe how one student even questioned if any specific Aboriginal learning styles actually exist, and even if they do, indicated that pedagogy should not be governed by this: ‘[y]ou either study/learn or you don’t. Just because you’re Aboriginal does not mean that a whole course structure should be changed to suit your way of learning’ (p.18).

The four research questions addressed in the overall study informing this paper sought to address those aspects that enhanced and hindered Aboriginal students’ transition into university:

- What aspects of the tertiary environment enhance the transition of Aboriginal students from under-represented groups into higher education?
- What type of curricula, resources and assessments enhance Aboriginal students’ transition to higher education?
- What particular activities and strategies improve Aboriginal students’ transition to higher education?
- What specific teaching practices augment the likelihood of success among the above student groups?

To this end, participants were asked to reflect on both their good and bad experiences of studying or teaching at university. Although many positive experiences were reported, it also became evident from the data that racism, including that directed at Aboriginal students, persists in our universities. Both explicit and implicit forms of racism were reported. The current paper therefore seeks to report on how this reflects a lack of cultural safety in our higher education institutions. In the following sections we present data from both staff and students and conclude with recommendations for universities based on our findings and current literature.

3. Method

The data presented here formed part of a qualitative study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tertiary student experience. A case study design was used as it was deemed more appropriate for capturing participants’ study and work experiences. Aboriginal students (n=56) and both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff (n=25) volunteered to be interviewed at four participating universities. A small group of 5 of these students chose to attend a focus group, with the remainder participating in individual interviews. All staff were interviewed individually. Some 96 students also responded to an online survey distributed nationwide.

Within the interviews a suggested series of questions was followed, but there was considerable flexibility and the approach was a more informal *yarn* (Note 4) about the participants’ experiences (see Appendix A for a copy of the interview schedule). Although interviewed by non-Aboriginal researchers, all involved had considerable experience interacting with sensitivity towards Aboriginal people. To ensure participants spoke freely, the interviews were not audio recorded, instead detailed notes were taken by the experienced research team members during the interviews and written up in full, post interview. Key points were constantly checked and clarified during the interview process. Further, at all stages the research was undertaken in consultation with an advisory team of Aboriginal academic staff, including our co-researcher. The in-depth interviews included sensitive and heart felt experiences.

Similarly, the online survey was voluntary, and because it included both closed and open questions, most of the 96 participants provided considerable detail about their experiences and perceptions. Therefore, although representing a relatively small proportion of Aboriginal students in higher education across Australia, there was considerable consistency across the evidence provided. In fact, the descriptions of stereotyping and explicit or implicit racism concerned us to such a degree that we felt the need to report them in this paper (see Oliver, Rochecouste & Grote, 2013 for further details).

Therefore the data which informs this paper were generated from thematic analysis of interview data relating to cultural, racial or exclusionary experience and from responses to the following questions in the online questionnaire.

4. Do you feel part of the whole university community? Yes/No (*Choose one*)

Can you describe what makes you feel like you are/are not part of the whole university community?
Write below.

5. Since you have been at university:

What good experiences have you had? *Write below.*

What bad experiences have you had? *Write below.*

6. While at university have you had any of the following experiences?

Racism? Yes/No (*Choose one*)

Bullying? Yes/No (*Choose one*)

If yes, where?

- in the curriculum?
- by staff?
- by students – Indigenous?
 - non-Indigenous?
- other? *Please write below*

Once the data were collected, the material was analysed qualitatively – identifying and categorising key themes. These were cross-checked by all members of the team and, when in doubt, the cultural nuances of the information verified by our Aboriginal co-researcher. This analysis was then supplemented by the online survey responses. The consistency across the data (interviews, online responses and advisory team/co-researcher input) enabled a strong degree of triangulation. The resultant themes are reported in the next section. Note that wherever possible the participants' own voices are used to illustrate the emerging themes.

4. Results

The themes to emerge from our interviews support previous research indicating that issues of racism, stereotyping and social isolation continue to affect the existence of cultural safety for Aboriginal university students. In addition, there is a particular concern regarding the impact on postgraduate students. This contributes in turn to a dilemma, that is, until more Aboriginal academics can be attracted to academe, the pervasive attitude and lack of inclusion will be hard to address. A fuller account of these and other issues are described in detail below.

4.1 Racism

Among the university experiences related to us by our cohort of Aboriginal students and very frequently mentioned was 'having to deal with racism and lack of understanding of Aboriginal issues'. This included 'overhearing racist comments from other students' or 'prejudice delivered by the lecturer'. In response to questions about racism, several respondents to our online survey described their experiences in detail:

Racism has been a bad experience with dealing with some university students [who] can't get past stereotypes and tar every Indigenous person with the same brush.

Racism - I have experienced it in college life, I have also experienced it in town shopping on paydays. I have also experienced at the University cafeteria. Also in lectures where they have spoken about Aboriginal people.

Racist behaviour was not just experienced by undergraduates, a number of the postgraduate students we interviewed also highlighted experiences of discrimination:

There is a lot of racism entrenched in institutions like universities. There are also racist attitudes you get from non-Aboriginal students.

It can be a negative when you are stereotyped and experience discrimination because you are Aboriginal.

and

... being ridiculed, laughed at and ignored by my post-graduate supervisors.

It seems that these behaviours were generated by both students and staff within our universities. Our participants therefore felt that faculty staff members should be responsible for educating their non-Aboriginal students about cultural sensitivity and inclusivity to avoid the covert and overt racism that occurred in their classes. As one Indigenous centre staff member described it:

... [they will] meet obstacles everyday, so they need to be strong: 'Even if they are valued at home, they know that they are not valued outside. They may have been told at school that they will never achieve anything.... Each bit of racism takes slices off you'.

Rogers-Falk and Vidler (2012) suggest a 'hard line' on racism 'that includes - responding, reprimanding, and policy implementation' (p. 2). They also recommend that 'Deans, Heads of School, Group Managers, and Pro Vice Chancellors need to be trained in dealing with racial discrimination and policies need to be developed by them to support these initiatives' (p. 2). It is clear that this is something that needs to happen if we are to provide culturally safe universities.

Teaching staff at the participating universities' Aboriginal centres described some practices used to address these concerns. For instance, one centre staff member described how he tackles these sensitive issues in his classes. His groups examine who they are as an Aboriginal men/women and how to keep that man/woman at university, for example, 'How do you handle being the only black (or white) person in the class or group?'

Several of the students we interviewed described being proactive themselves as they felt a need to respond to the attitudes they witnessed. Indeed, one student was inspired to challenge the status quo when he/she identified 'a lack of cultural sensitivity, cultural safety and understanding':

Since starting at University I have experienced varied behaviours that have not only shocked me during my time of study, but influenced me personally in student rights and the future of Aboriginal community attending Universities. Changes can be made with good policy and education.

There were also students who aimed to give non-Aboriginal students 'a broader understanding about Indigenous people and breaking some of the stereotypes down by being myself':

[Being Aboriginal] allows me to teach other students about my culture while learning more about western culture.

Another strategy was to avoid contexts where racism occurred. For example, one student recalled his experience of racism in his business classes where most of his classmates were from south-east Asia and did not understand Aboriginal culture. 'Most of their perceptions came from Australian students who are also quite ignorant'. Consequently, jokes were made at his expense. Although he lodged a complaint with his lecturer (who was also from a south-east Asian background and recently arrived), no action was taken. This student now prefers to work in his university's Aboriginal centre which he has found supportive.

However, university Indigenous centres themselves were not immune to racism. One student had complained about racism within his Aboriginal centre which he then felt had negative repercussions. He reported:

... having to complain about discrimination within the Indigenous student services unit. Opportunities were being withheld from some students and I found out and made a formal complaint. Although I know I did the right thing I feel I am now seen as a trouble-maker even though the party I complained about was found to have done the wrong thing and is no longer at the university.

During our interviews we also heard reports of racism occurring within the Aboriginal student cohort, this was often, although not always about not being 'black enough':

I haven't been able to connect with the Indigenous university community because I do not have traditional Aboriginal features.

Clearly there is much to address regarding the lack of cultural safety in our universities. Especially concerning were those behaviours that are buried or less explicit. These are discussed in detail in the next sections.

4.2 Stereotyping

The problems that staff and students encountered with regard to stereotyping were expressed in a number of ways. These included the content of courses and the expectations held for Aboriginal students. For example, one student riled against the stereotypical description of Aboriginal people in the content of their lectures:

... in lectures where they have spoken about Aboriginal people drunk down town in the mall. If they educated themselves to see that dispossession and intergenerational deep trauma like that from stolen generations or culture fractured by taking of children not allowed to speak certain languages and practice rituals and culture, leaves an identity in two minds on the brink of disaster finding refuge in the bottle.

We heard accounts from students, who described themselves as ‘not looking Aboriginal’, of the dilemmas they faced in class during discussions about Aboriginal people and their society. When they heard comments that were discriminatory, or content that was stereotypical to the point of being racist, they did not rebut the information for fear of ‘outing themselves’ and being subjected to further racism – or being ‘treated differently’.

In terms of enrolment in courses, Aboriginal centre staff members described how Aboriginal students continue to be directed towards traditional areas of study, such as health and education. We heard reports from staff of students who had expressed a desire to go into non-traditional areas being actively dissuaded from doing so. Even when they were enrolled in traditional areas, further implied stereotyping occurred ‘Arts students are often channeled in Indigenous units where the content includes a lot of death and mayhem and is very emotional for students who may do better doing other units’. This was evident in one of our student’s interview responses: ‘It’s hard because when studying Indigenous studies some of the content hits home a bit more’.

The data presented above show a need to increase cultural competency amongst staff at universities – including teaching staff, but also those involved in the enrolment procedures. Although cultural awareness workshops were frequently provided for faculties by the Indigenous centre staff from the participating universities, academic staff were generally reluctant to attend.

Beyond this, however, there is a need for explicit direction about the stereotyping of Aboriginal people and how this is no longer acceptable in today’s society, particularly in universities, if we are to make them culturally safe environments. Part of such safety includes an awareness of Aboriginality and what it encompasses.

4.3 Isolation

A number of our participants described their vulnerability because of the isolation that they experience at university. Clearly this situation is exacerbated when one is the only Aboriginal student in the class and can lead to loneliness and feeling as an outsider:

As an Aboriginal person when I come here to the university I feel isolated, I am just left basically to work through my studies on my own. If you don't ask for help you don't get help.

[My university] still has a long way to go to make Indigenous students feel more of the community but they are slowly getting there.

Feelings of isolation were particularly evident among the postgraduate cohort as they were even more likely to be the only Indigenous student in their course or one of ‘two Indigenous students out of 80’ or were experiencing ‘stress, depression, isolation as a PhD student’. Other students described university as ‘a lonely place full of people in a hurry’ or as sitting ‘with the ongoing cultural tension of being an outsider’.

Several post-graduate respondents felt that support for Aboriginal postgraduate students was lacking:

[We need] proper and culturally safe places at university as well as mentors.

More support for indigenous postgrads would be nice, I know there are less of us, but sometimes it seems like things are always targeted to undergrads, it is even harder when you reach postgrad level!

The facilities are there but the atmosphere for postgrads is severely lacking compared to my previous experiences there. There is no-one around.

These students advocated for a strong network, for example, ‘I think having a strong Indigenous network at university is essential for Indigenous people who feel out of place and marginalised’. To this end, one centre member

of staff, who was also completing her PhD, had set up an Aboriginal postgraduate student website at her university in order to bring students together.

Barney (2013) notes that ‘there is little known about the effectiveness of support mechanisms and issues for Indigenous students undertaking postgraduate study’ (p. 515) and reiterates Trudgett’s (2009) call for ‘designated Indigenous postgraduate support officers within Indigenous units who can assist students to navigate the postgraduate experience’ (Barney, 2013, p. 516). Culturally appropriate postgraduate supervision has also been highlighted in the literature, for example Day (2007, cited in Barney, 2013, p. 517) suggests the need for alternative types of support and stresses the importance of supervisors having experience with Indigenous cultural issues. These attributes include ‘the right mix of disciplinary knowledge and expertise, research skills, and understanding of [Indigenous students]’ (McKinley, Grant, Middleton, Irwin & Tumoana Williams, 2011, p. 123).

The need to attract more Aboriginal students into postgraduate studies has been identified by the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) (2007) as a major component in changing university culture. Currently available data report that Indigenous Australians constitute only 0.6% of masters by research completions and only 0.3% of doctoral completions, despite accounting for 2.5% of the total Australian population (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; Pechenkina & Anderson, 2012). Ensuring the success of Aboriginal postgraduate students is also fundamental in addressing the dearth of Aboriginal academic staff in higher education institutions.

4.4 Shame and Aboriginal knowledge

One prevalent issue to emerge from the data was the issue of *shame*. The Aboriginal English term *shame* refers to the shyness and embarrassment experienced by Aboriginal people when they become the centre of attention for either positive or negative reasons. The Aboriginal English term *shame* does not include the semantic dimension of guilt for past action as the English term does (see further Harkins, 1990; Eagleson, Kaldor, & Malcolm, 1982; Oliver, Grote, Rochecouste & Exell, 2012). Aboriginal people will avoid potentially shame-inducing situations (Oliver et al., 2012). However, Herbert (personal communication, 2013) maintains that these days *shame* behaviour is more dependent on one’s upbringing and not a general response among Aboriginal people. Even so, our participants contributed accounts of the *shame* they experienced at university, not only when cultural and societal issues were made public in front of the group, but simply by being Aboriginal and becoming the focus of attention.

One student described feelings akin to *shame* because his/her existing Aboriginal knowledge was not accepted within the academic system for what it is – self-knowledge - and required attribution to others:

I have found for myself that my culture plays a large part in the way I think and feel. I have a deep wisdom that I can tap into to bring forth knowledge, I feel frustrated to have to validate this with referencing someone who I have never met before to qualify my understandings. I then become frustrated with myself because I know I have to code shift so the lecturer receiving my work will think that I have done my homework simply by the way I present it rather than by the way I am. I understand many people would also go through these feelings and it doesn't only affect Indigenous students, though I feel so attuned to my cultural knowledge that the University construct at times feels like a complete insult to being human.

Further, the presentation of Aboriginal history and experience using western perspectives is problematic for Aboriginal students. Students see a limited and misinformed view of themselves as they learn how they have been studied and misrepresented (Nakata, 2006, p272). Over time Aboriginal cultural studies have been ‘mediated through the lens of western culture’ (Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), 2011) excluding Aboriginal perspectives and experience. Devlin (2009) refers to the ‘hidden curriculum’ or ‘the values and beliefs that are signified by what is, and is not, represented in the intended and enacted curriculum and discourse’ (p. 5).

Issues relating to Aboriginal knowledge and western perspectives were also raised by a number of postgraduate students:

I wish other students were more aware of Aboriginal people and Medicine really stereotypes everything.

Being an Aboriginal tertiary student means living in a constant realm of cultural tension, pulled between Western education and my cultural identity.

[Being Aboriginal] impacts on everything. It's not like I can turn my culture on and off like a light switch.

These students also considered that ‘being Aboriginal brings with it a wealth of knowledge and experience that I can apply to my studies and research’ and found the need for ‘educating non-Aboriginal people about our right to also be at university and for the need of culturally appropriate and relevant spaces and courses at universities’. One student

reported being shocked that Aboriginal knowledge was not recognised or acknowledged in his/her courses. Furthermore, he/she felt the need to adopt western perspectives of Aboriginal culture and history which contrasted drastically with their own lived experience and cultural identity. For these participants the cumulative effect of this is an underlying tension and feeling of shame.

Shame appears to be a pervasive aspect of Aboriginal university students' experience and one that must be considered and attended to if we are to make universities culturally safe places. Equally educating staff and students alike with regard to Aboriginal knowledge may be key to ensuring cultural safety. In a similar vein, issues of racism, stereotyping and isolation need to be addressed. How this might occur is described in the following section.

5. Creating culturally safe universities

In this section we propose three major ways in which cultural safety might be improved in universities. First, given the reports in our data of cultural insensitivity and racism among academic staff, staff awareness is important. This includes both awareness of Aboriginal life experiences and of how to challenge the ways that Aboriginal people have been represented in western academic paradigms in the past. Second is the issue of whose responsibility this is. In line with numerous scholars in this area, and from our reports of staff reluctance to raise their awareness of Indigenous experience, we believe that it is a 'whole of university' responsibility and beyond the scope and capacity of the Aboriginal centres. Finally, given the attitudes held by some non-Aboriginal students and staff, the key to improved cultural safety is ensuring greater representation of Aboriginal people at levels of the institution.

5.1 Raising Awareness

Raising the profile of Aboriginal history and experience among the university staff is essential for developing their cultural competence, which in turn is necessary for the establishment of cultural safety in higher education. Having teaching staff aware of these issues is vital for Aboriginal student retention and success at university. As one Aboriginal centre staff member recounted, he has experienced angry students – 'an intergenerational anger or sadness', but claims that 'we are all manifestations of those legacies – they are hard to tap into, lead to attrition and deflection of deadlines... some of these students are dealing with issues and the history of colonization, so it is frustrating at first to get through the baggage'.

To this end, ensuring that non-Aboriginal tertiary educators undertake cultural competency (Note 5) training is an objective of the *National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (Universities Australia, 2011). This framework promotes a system-wide approach to making Australian universities places where Indigenous learners can 'thrive and feel at home' (p. 7). It is an opportunity to provide both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people with the knowledge that helps them to contest poorly informed perceptions and enables them to challenge 'the binarisms and dualistic modes of thought... [and] evoke Indigenous knowledge to challenge the linearity of Western paradigms privileged in the academy' (Sefa Dei, 2008, p. 8). This approach, to follow Herbert (2010), empowers students (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) to become agents of change in the broader Australian context.

5.2 Allocating Responsibility

In most universities, professional development seminars are offered to faculties by the Aboriginal centres. These sessions provide an opportunity to enhance staff understanding of Aboriginal history, culture and contemporary experience and have been recommended in several reports (e.g., Ridgeway 2012). The benefits of such knowledge were also supported in our data and explained by one staff interviewee in the following way:

[k]nowing the history and being able to discuss the policies and events that have affected Aboriginal people provides a commonality with students and takes the heat out of the discussion.

However, caution must be exercised when adopting such an approach. Several scholars have warned of Aboriginal centres being viewed as service delivery outlets 'rather than as an independently valued repository of Indigenous knowledge' (Walter, 2012, p. 3). Furthermore, there is the expectation that Aboriginal centres and academic staff carry the responsibility for 'Indigenis[ing] the entire university, its curriculum, policy and practice that results in a division of labour rarely expected of other academics' (Rigney, 2012, p. 9). In fact it does seem, from what we heard from staff, that for many universities the establishment of an Aboriginal centre has often obviated the need for further Aboriginal recognition, that is the 'Centres *are* the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strategy' (Walter, 2012, p 3). Clearly such tokenism adds little to the development of cultural safety and calls for the need for a university-wide approach.

5.3 A Vicious Circle

Rigney (2012) attributes the failure to promote Aboriginal knowledge and understanding among staff to a lack of Aboriginal academics and researchers. Participants in our study noted a reluctance among academic staff to raise their awareness of Aboriginal knowledge and experience. Little seems to have occurred to address the observation made by the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC, 2006) noting the low numbers of Aboriginal staff in universities, especially in governance and management roles (p. 5) and the ‘lack of visibility of Indigenous cultures and knowledges on campus’ (p. 4).

This creates a vicious circle whereby a lack of cultural safety results from overt and covert racism, and, in turn, generates feelings of isolation and exclusion from the higher education community and the content of university. This affects both undergraduate and postgraduate students so that there are worrying levels of attrition among Aboriginal undergraduates, and too few continuing into postgraduate studies. Fewer successful postgraduates results in fewer Aboriginal academics and researchers which in turn limits the opportunities for embedding Aboriginal knowledge and understanding into the curriculum. The flow-on effect of this is an ongoing lack of cultural safety provided by ill-informed, culturally incompetent staff. The vicious circle is completed with continuing low numbers of Aboriginal students seeking to enrol in and complete higher education degrees. This cycle of poor cultural safety is shown in Figure 1 below:

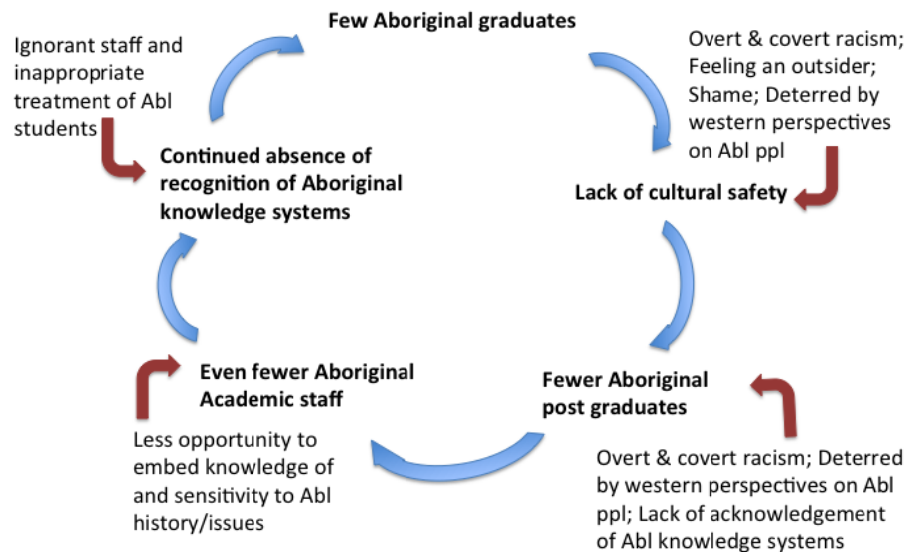


Figure 1. Cycle of poor cultural safety

6. Summary and Conclusion

Clearly the lack of cultural competence among current staff and students contributes to poor cultural safety in our universities. From our data numerous Aboriginal students reported racist and exclusionary experiences. We have therefore highlighted the need to improve staff attitudes to, and understanding of, Aboriginal culture and history. We have also raised the need to acknowledge Aboriginal history and knowledge systems with our universities. Further, while life experience to date has equipped the majority of these students to deal with overt racist behaviours, they were less sure of how to deal with cultural insensitivity at the institutional level.

Recognising the need to develop the cultural competency of teaching staff is an essential first step in achieving cultural safety, however, as we suggested more explicit steps are also required. Specifically we would argue that there is a need to implement cultural safety at our universities by addressing overt and covert racism and by developing cultural sensitivity among all students and staff across the university.

The importance of cultural safety lies in its being an *internal* issue with an achievable solution and one which should be the responsibility of the university, its staff and its students. According to Williams (1999), ‘[w]e need to move on from the ‘short term, cost effective, quick fix’ approach to Indigenous issues, driven by economic imperatives, the clamouring of industry and conservative, hegemonic practices. Critical reflection on experiential knowledge and defining or framing a debate on cultural safety is essential’ (p. 213). An even stronger view is offered by Walker & Sonn (2006), ‘it is important to recognise that failure to instil culturally safe practices is a diminution and erosion of

fundamental cultural and human rights for Indigenous peoples' (p. 163). These scholars note, in reference to their focus in the provision of health services, that 'practitioners may not always be aware of how their behaviour and method of interaction could make people from different cultures feel unsafe' (p. 163). Sonn and Green (2006) propose an initial approach whereby non-Aboriginal people understand racism 'in a way that necessitates a critique of dominant, white practices in Australian society' (p. 342), and that we understand colonialism and how it has oppressed Aboriginal people, in particular that 'some colonising practices are reflected in how ethnic and racial minorities are constructed as an inferior or exotic 'other'' (Walker & Sonn, 2006, p. 162). Moreover, we need to be aware that to overcome racism, we must challenge existing models and guidelines that are often informed by cultural assumptions based on 'Euro-American traditions and world views' (Sonn & Green, 2006, p. 337).

Perhaps one way forward is for university staff and policy makers to consider and develop Bhabha's (1993) concept of Third Space or the 'fissure' between two cultures 'which can be opened up' rather than pinned down or covered up (Dudgeon & Fielder 2006, p. 400). The advantage of such 'space' is its hybridity which 'entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy' (Bhabha, 1993, p. 4, cited in Dudgeon & Fielder, 2006, p. 401) and accommodates the way that cultures are constantly changing.

Given the nature of the data presented in this paper, it would be easy to be pessimistic about the potential for universities to engage in the suggested strategies and increase the success of Aboriginal students in higher education. However, Dudgeon and Fielder (2006) suggest teaching policies and practices which engage a 'hybrid space' where there is an 'open[ing] up [of] the learning environment ... for students to critically self reflect on their social and cultural identities' (p. 406). Not only would this approach support Aboriginal students, it would also benefit the multicultural student cohort at Australian universities.

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Appendix A: Sample student interview schedule

Note that this is a sample of an schedule which would have been adapted for individual and focus group interviews to suit the learning situation (external/internal) and experience.

- What were your first feelings when you heard that you had got into university?
- What did you think it would be like at that time?
- When you first got here, what did it feel like? (as you expected, better, worse)
- What sort of things did you do in the first week (orientation week)? Did you enjoy them? (yes/no/why)
- Then after that, how did you feel when you first started lectures and tutorials?
- What sort of support did your centre/lecturers/tutors provide for you? (good/no good/why)
- What are the subjects (units) that you enjoy most? (why)
- What is the best thing that you have experienced about studying at university?
- What is the worst thing that you have experienced at university?
- What do you hope to achieve by getting a university degree?
- What problems do you see that might stop you from completing your degree? (literacy/language/culture/mixing with white students/assignments, deadlines, exams/ family commitments/ health, etc.)
- How does your family feel about you being a university student?
- Can you quickly talk about your primary and secondary school experiences?
- Have you made friends at university? (who are they)
- Do you work on university tasks with these friends? (at university or outside university)
- Do you do most of your uni work in the Aboriginal centre, in the library, or at home? (which and why)
- Do you feel that there is enough recognition/acknowledgement of your Aboriginality here at uni? (in the units, in the university generally)
- Have you ever felt excluded or suffered from racism when at university?
- What do you think Aboriginal students need to be successful at university?

Notes

Note 1. ATSI – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Note 2. Phillip Falk, (2007 - current) *Pathways to Indigenous Inclusive Teaching and Learning Practices – modelling a law school* - PhD questionnaire and interviews (work in progress). Question 20 of ATSI student questionnaire.

Note 3. ‘... it is generally accepted that an Aboriginal person is one who is a descendant of an Indigenous inhabitant of Australia, who identifies as an Aboriginal person, and who is recognised as Aboriginal by members of the community where they live. Indigenous identity is not about the colour of a person’s skin or the percentage of ‘blood’ they have. Many Aboriginal people have both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ancestry but this does not make them any less Aboriginal. Aboriginality is about descent, culture, upbringing and life experiences’ (Purdie, Dudgeon & Walter, 2010, p. 34).

Note 4. ‘Yarning in a semi-structured interview is an informal and relaxed discussion through which both the researcher and participant journey together visiting places and topics of interest relevant to the research study. Yarning is a process that requires the researcher to develop and build a relationship that is accountable to Indigenous people participating in the research’ (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010, p. 38).

Note 5. The term Indigenous cultural competency in this context is described as ‘Student and staff knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australian cultures, histories and contemporary realities and awareness of Indigenous protocols, combined with the proficiency to engage and work effectively in Indigenous contexts congruent to the expectations of Indigenous Australian peoples’ (Universities Australia, 2011, p. 171).