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Celebrating & Sustaining Indigenous Knowledge through Research

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Abstract

This paper reports on the growth of research within the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC). The focus is the research and later, research and journal working group. The intent is to discuss the publication of the WINHEC Journal, discussion papers and other activities such as the development of the Research Standards while analysing the underpinning imperatives to such work. The paper will also examine the complexity of progressing research, founded in local knowledge, aligned internationally to broader conceptions of Indigenous knowledge. The suggestion underlying this paper is that if research is undertaken from a position of Indigenous knowledge and epistemology, it will celebrate and sustain Indigenous people.

Introduction

As a strategy to limit the impact of negative colonial power which has prevented Indigenous success on almost every front, including within higher education and research, the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) was established with representation from Indigenous Aotearoa, Australia, Canada, the United States and Norway. The Consortium was founded in Canada, in 2002, by these Indigenous educational and research leaders to accelerate the articulation of Indigenous epistemology (ways of knowing, education, philosophy, and research) within the academy and across nations. In the subsequent years strategies have been progressed through the Accreditation (Affirmation) Committee and the Research and Journal Working Group. WINHEC, among others, to provide an international mechanism concerned with the sustainability of Indigenous peoples and the continuity of knowledges through transformed education and research.

Built on respect rather than powerful dominance or competition, WINHEC represents the diversity of the nations from which it was formed. WINHEC, through its committees and working groups, also responds to the dispersal of its members through multiple methods which included the circulation of draft statements or discussion papers, electronic circulation of ideas in draft documents and locally based face-to-face collaborations at annual meetings. This committed approach enacted by all members has resulted in collaborative development of numerous documents including the WINHEC Journals, the Cultural and Research Standards and several other papers which honour the fundamental relationships of most Indigenous societies.

The purpose of this paper is to tell the story of WINHEC and in particular the focus of the Research and Journal Working Group through a discussion on the publication of the WINHEC Journal, highlighting the papers developed and commissioned while bringing to light other developments such as the Research Standards. The underpinning imperatives to

such work will also be raised along with an acknowledgement of the importance and celebration of the knowledges and languages of those involved.

Background

The World Indigenous Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) was founded on the principles outlined in the following Articles of the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:

Article #12,

Indigenous Peoples have the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of human remains.

Article #13,

Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

Article #14,

Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

Article #15,

Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information. States shall take effective measures, in consultation and cooperation with the Indigenous peoples concerned, to combat prejudice and eliminate discrimination and to promote tolerance, understanding and good relations among Indigenous peoples and all other segments of society.¹

In addition the Consortium supported the Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Rights in Education (1999)², developed after the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education (WIPCE) was held in Australia. The Coolangatta statement highlighted Indigenous people's right to be Indigenous.

It is important to pause here for a moment and consider that the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) was established to address a very big agenda. This is identifiable in the foundation documents upon which the Consortium is formed and the

¹ www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf (accessed 14.08.12)

² Available at jaie.asu.edu/v39/V39I1A4.pdf (accessed 14.08.12)

need to *accelerate the articulation of epistemology* identified above and the additional aims outlined below:

- Protect and enhance Indigenous spiritual beliefs, culture and languages through higher education;
- Advance the social, economical, and political status of Indigenous Peoples that contribute to the well-being of Indigenous communities through higher education;
- Create an accreditation body for Indigenous education initiatives and systems that identify common criteria, practices and principles by which Indigenous Peoples live;
- Recognise the significance of Indigenous education;
- Create a global network for sharing knowledge through exchange forums and state of the art technology ; and,
- Recognise the educational rights of Indigenous Peoples.³

WINHEC established its place in the world by setting this massive agenda. To do this WINHEC aimed to progress subsequent strategies from multiple sites of Indigenous vision and commitment focussed through annual meetings and technology. Through this model much has been achieved.

All achievements cannot be documented in this paper suffice to say a brief overview will be provided with the main focus being the Research and Journal Working Group. Briefly, over the past ten years, WINHEC has focussed on education and the endorsement of the WINHEC Cultural Standards (*exemplar*) and related institutional or programmatic accreditation mechanisms for Indigenous education along with the development of an Accreditation (Affirmation) Committee. This has permitted numerous organisations, including curriculum and programs, to evaluate against locally developed standards modelled on the WINHEC Cultural Standards. A number have identified the WINHEC Cultural Standards as being open enough for application in their local context and have therefore evaluated against same. This has been ground breaking work which has been affirming of local knowledge, cultural and language realities and the importance of same within education.

The research area became a focus in the second full year of WINHEC's operations through the establishment of the loosely formed Research Working Group. The first meeting of this group proposed the publication of an inaugural WINHEC Journal for 2005, a statement of research was also developed and placed on the organisational website. Then with a name change the Research and Journal Working Group developed or commissioned a number of papers to work toward the development and publication of the WINHEC Research Standards. A number of other working groups established to discuss the use of technology, finance and 'own language', among other matters, were also active. More recently, the Academic Committee has proposed a nested series of postgraduate awards to progress and support the visions of Indigenous people across the world.

³ <http://www1.iprtc.ndhu.edu.tw/2012winhec/goals.html> (accessed 14.08.12)

In all of the committees and working groups Indigenous knowledges presented as much more than content alone as the very operations within WINHEC exhibited as Indigenous processes while the outcomes of each and every activity aimed at bringing to fruition Indigenous advantage, at the local level. This aspect will be lightly explored later in this article, as we now turn to the Research and Journal Working Group.

Research Journal and Research Standards Development

The Research and Journal Working Group grew out of the developments within and around WINHEC. This Group was responsible for the publication of the Journal, Research Standards and a number of other papers. The publications highlighted the importance of establishing Indigenous higher education and research as valid and, often, inter-connected streams of scholarship on a myriad of concerns for Indigenous people.

The WINHEC Research and Journal Working Group operated on the basis of minutes and recommendations and, at each meeting, considered the matters previously identified in recommendations to measure achievements. For example, at the 2005 WINHEC meeting, it was noted that a Research Statement developed to guide the work of the Group had been accepted and the successful launch of the first WINHEC Journal, edited by Danica Waiti, from Aotearoa (New Zealand), was celebrated. Discussion also circulated around the use of the internet to promote achievements in member nations such as the information from Australia concerning “two PhD students who had won the right for elders...to receive honorary degrees in recognition of their mentorship and co-supervision” and the importance of holding on-line discussions. The recommendations in these minutes, subsequently outlined the theme of the next Journal as *Indigenous Values*, identified the need to publish doctoral completions and requested the Research Statement be posted on the WINHEC website.

This very cyclical form of action is also identifiable in the notes of the 2008 WINHEC meeting, held in Melbourne Australia, which proposed that the next Journal be titled, *Indigenous Voices: Indigenous Symbols*. One then is able to identify that the 2009 WINHEC Research and Journal Working Group minute’s recorded that editor, Dr Rachel Selby and Te Wananga o Aotearoa were thanked for the work in developing a powerful series of papers within the Journal. This Research and Journal Working Group meeting, in Tyendinaga, Canada, also confirmed the need to continue work on the establishment of a web-based searchable database of potential Indigenous higher degree examiners and supervisors. The naming of the next Journal as *Indigenous Voices: Indigenous Research* was recorded. Also documented was a thank you to members from Australia⁴ who had tabled two documents on Indigenous research: *The Indigenous Research, Principles, Protocols, Ethical Domains and Guidelines* and a commissioned paper by Terri Janke, 2009, titled *Writing Up Indigenous Research: Authorship, Copyright and Indigenous Knowledge Systems* to inform the discussion on the development of the WINHEC Research Standards along with a note that the tabled draft Research Standards were to be placed on the WINHEC website with the final document to be posted when development was concluded.

⁴ Professor V Arbon, Professor B Robertson, Professor B Anning and Mr G Thomas

In the case of the WINHEC Research Standards the process of development had begun in 2004, where the need for Research Standards had been flagged in early discussions on research. This process of developing the WINHEC Research Standards provides a clear picture of the complex of activities undertaken to obtain an agreed outcome. Turning to this area the *Indigenous Research, Principles, Protocols, Ethical Domains and Guidelines*⁵ provides a detailed discussion around research, stating:

WINHEC is committed to research activities which ask and find answers to locally, regionally, nationally or internationally raised questions while honouring, affirming and advancing knowledge through Indigenous scholarship. WINHEC is committed to research undertaken by and with Indigenous people for Indigenous outcomes. Researchers may be Indigenous and, may also be undertaken by members of the community. WINHEC therefore promotes best practice in the conduct of research. Such practice in research is to be guided by fundamental principles at all stages and levels of activity. The application of these principles to the Indigenous research programs or those undertaken under its auspices of WINHEC will be a significant component of a distinctive form of Indigenous scholarship and intellectual work.

The following principles are intended to:

- (a) Ensure research arises from Indigenous authority and knowledge;
- (b) Promote research scholarship and methodologies that honour and affirm own knowledge while contributing to knowledge more generally;
- (c) Impact positively international, national, regional or local issues and outcomes of concern to Indigenous peoples;
- (d) Ensure research complies with the requirements of WINHEC and where applicable local regulatory bodies (e.g., National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) in Australia or other relevant bodies in other States); and
- (e) Advantage Indigenous peoples and their communities.

The second commissioned document identified that there are numerous and complex matters in the research field. The document also highlights that there are a “growing number of protocols which guide the relationship between the researcher and the researched, however, they lack sufficient details about authorship, copyright, and the future use of research”.

Twenty five or so copies of the above documents were circulated to those present on the first day of the Research and Journal Working Group meeting in 2009 for overnight review and reading. On the second day, through a workshop format, discussion circulated around the readings and an agreement was reached that a first step was to establish a set of standards. The second part of the workshop was then focused through a rough draft of a possible Research Standards document. This focus provided comment and improvements to the document. The draft once updated was provided support subject to some change therefore it

⁵ This document with modification is presently submitted as: Arbon, V., Anning, B., Robertson, B., and Thomas, G., 2012, *Research and Research Protocols and Guidelines*, Indigenous Press

was circulated to an email list of those who had attended the meeting for comment and additional improvements. The document was again emailed out to an expanded list of those involved after additional suggestions for up-dates had been addressed.

The *WINHEC Research Standards First Edition*, (2010), was then posted on the WINHEC website for one year and included a basic outline of Indigenous research, clarification of the role of researchers and identified ways to enact research. The final WINHEC Research Standards, First Edition, (2011), emerged from the next meeting at the Sami University in Guovdageaidnu, Norway. This document was further edited through an email process and was posted, as the fully endorsed document, on the WINHEC website in February 2011. The core WINHEC Research Standards contained in this document are:

Indigenous Research

- *(a) respects local Indigenous authority particularly that of Elders and respected knowledgeable others;*
- *(b) recognises knowledge as part of a living and constantly adapting system that is grounded in the past, but continues to grow through the present and into the future and reinforces this in research approach;*
- *(c) uses the local language respectfully as a foundation for interpretation and meaning;*
- *(d) understands relationships across knowledge derived from diverse knowledge systems;*
- *(e) acknowledges multi-ownership and levels of knowledge; and*
- *(f) addresses community and individual responsibility/ownership of knowledge.*

Individual Researchers

- *(a) work with local Indigenous Elders and Respected knowledge holders;*
- *(b) ensure prior and informed consent;*
- *(c) recognise their responsibilities and the ongoing influences of Western knowledge;*
- *(d) build on the knowledge and skills of the local cultural community as a foundation from which to achieve success;*
- *(e) engage responsibly and effectively in research activities that are grown from/based on Indigenous ways of knowing and doing;*
- *(f) demonstrate appreciation of the relationships, connections and processes of interaction of all elements in and of the world;*
- *(g) situate one's self and define ones purpose for undertaking research competently;*
- *(h) develop a critical self awareness.*

Research Process and Practice (Enacting Research)

- *(a) addresses requirements outlined in this document and locally;*
- *(b) incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing and practicing in its work linking what is being researched to everyday lives;*
- *(c) works closely with individuals and communities to achieve a high level of complementary research outcomes and expectations;*
- *(d) honours Indigenous Elders and respected knowledge holders scholarship and authority;*
- *(e) recognises the potential of individuals and communities and provides the training as necessary for them to participate powerfully in research;*

- (f) *accepts responsibility to protect sacred sites, secret and sacred knowledge and other artefacts.*

Organisational Practice (Facilitating Research)

- (a) *has high level of involvement of Indigenous staff and Elders and respected knowledge holders in lead organizations;*
- (b) *fosters on-going participation, communication and interaction between researchers, programs and community researchers and personnel;*
- (c) *recognizes and assures ownership of intellectual knowledge – ownership of data needs to sit with the Indigenous community;*
- (d) *provides remuneration for time and other costs and, dispersal of publication profits to community;*
- (e) *ensures sacred sites, secret and sacred knowledge and other artefacts are protected.*

Community Practice (Linking Research)

- (a) *recognises local Indigenous Elders and Respected knowledge holders;*
- (b) *honours the primacy and validity of Indigenous knowledge as it is defined and articulated locally;*
- (c) *takes an active authoritative role in research while nurturing family responsibility, sense of belonging and cultural identity;*
- (d) *assists new members in learning and utilizing knowledge and information generated through research;*
- (e) *contributes to all aspects of research design, implementation and outcomes for local advantage; and,*
- (f) *ensures sacred sites, secret and sacred knowledge and other artefacts are protected.*

This final document is very similar to the original although it brings into the standards notions of sacred knowledge and is introduced through the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007), which highlights Indigenous peoples have the right to free, prior and informed consent. Furthermore, the UN Declaration's Article 31.1 on the rights of Intellectual Property is also quoted for it states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.

International mechanisms such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)⁶ 1992, were also drawn on to inform the WINHEC Research Standards. Notably, *The Tkarihwaïé:ri*⁷ *Code of Ethical Conduct to Ensure Respect for the Cultural and Intellectual Heritage of*

⁶ see www.cbd.int/history

⁷ Pronounced (Tga-ree-wa-yie-ree), a Mohawk term meaning “the proper way”.

Indigenous and Local Communities”,⁸ which points to the *UN Convention on Biodiversity* adopted in October 2010, is also sighted for it states:

Indigenous and local communities should have the opportunity to actively participate in research that affects them or which makes use of their traditional knowledge related to the objectives of the Convention, and can decide on their own research initiatives and priorities, conduct their own research, including building their own research institutions and promoting the building of cooperation, capacity and competence.

In recognising Indigenous peoples’ inherent and prior rights to their lands and resources and respecting their legitimate authority to require that third parties enter into an equal and respectful relationship with them, based on the principle of informed consent, the WINHEC Research Standards document set out to advocate fundamental requirements for research activity to ensure not only protection but local research initiatives are permitted to develop.

It is important to note that Indigenous Knowledge is not bound by time as it is continuing, dynamic and is simultaneously accessed through past, present and future. This is noted by Janke⁹ (1999), who states:

Indigenous knowledge systems form part of a living heritage. Indigenous knowledge systems contain a wealth of information including traditional arts, crafts, dance and cultural expressions, belief systems, customary laws, environmental knowledge of plants and animals and kinship systems...under Indigenous laws, knowledge may be held by one person, a family or community, and the right to share or disseminate that knowledge is subject to a complex system of consents. There is also a cultural obligation to pass on knowledge, and to guard its cultural integrity.

This point is included in the WINHEC Research Standards as the primacy and validity of Indigenous knowledge, as it is defined and articulated locally, is a fundamental requirement in all research activities.

In this context the tensions of epistemology must be addressed through translation, dialogue and negotiation to achieve not only informed consent but outcomes of Indigenous relevance through research. As Porsanger (2010) argues and which is also included in the Research Standards:

Research protocols for each research project on indigenous issues must be negotiated with indigenous and local communities with regard to the following key issues: Respect, Reciprocity, Reliability, and Relevance

⁸ <http://www.cbd.int/doc/decisions/cop-10/cop-10-dec-42-en.pdf>

⁹ Janke Terri, 1999, *Our culture: our future – Report on Australian Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights*, Michael Frankel and Company, written and published under commission by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Sydney

Interestingly Smith, a Maori scholar, lists twenty five different principles that must be considered when carrying out research in the Maori arena. These principles are: (i) prior rights; (ii) self-determination; (iii) inalienability; (iv) traditional guardianship; (v) active participation; (vi) full disclosure; (vii) prior informed consent and veto; (viii) confidentiality; (ix) respect; (x) active protection; (xi) precaution; (xii) compensation and equitable sharing; (xiii) the support of Indigenous research; (xiv) the dynamic interactive cycle; and (xv) restitution. This list is also similar to those captured within the WINHEC Research Standards document and were considered in its development.

Protocols and guidelines emerged within Australia through the support of the Special Purposes Committee of the National Health and Medical Research Committee (NHMRC) and the Menzies Foundation to hold a conference in Alice Springs in 1986 which outlined a list of research recommendations that called for community control of research, for the outcomes of same to be provided to the community and for improved ethics (NHMRC 1991, Arbon 2008). This initial activity was soon progressed through a national workshop at Camden, Sydney which resulted in the *Guidelines on Ethical Matters in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research* since been up-dated (NHMRC 1991; NHMRC 2007). A number of aligned documents include the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (AIATSIS), *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies* (2011) also emerged and have recently been up-dated. The WINHEC Research Standards also finds alignment with these Australian standards.

Finally and importantly the WINHEC Research Standards, in identifying many of the points raised by WINHEC members and many Aboriginal people across the world including Australia, state that researchers must increasingly hone their knowledge and skills in order to work “respectfully and collaboratively within Indigenous knowledge and within the relationships of all”. Additionally, this document notes that Elders and Knowledgeable others can also be the researcher, the advisors or the focus of research and they too are “required to maintain deep obligations to their knowledge and the balance of all within the environment” as they engage within this practice of research.

The process of developing this document was very complex and drew on papers, expertise, discussions, two meetings and at least three electronic circulations to up to thirty five or forty people across the world. This process was required for underlying knowledge, cultural and language reasons that apply to all activities undertaken within many an Indigenous context.

The WINHEC Research Standards underpin and contribute to Indigenous knowledge continuity through proposing ways of respectfully working with Indigenous knowledges while guiding the researcher/s through awareness of the research principles, protocols and ethical domains and noting the importance of Indigenous people being a researcher/s within any project.

This same complex process of development has been utilised to move toward the publication of the WINHEC Journal. For example, a process of on-line announcements and follow-up emails over several months called for papers, these were then received, reviewed and reviewers feedback was then provided and authors then submitted the final to create the journal

publication through the ongoing work of an Editor and other support peoples and funding. This collaborative process has created and celebrated a number of high quality journals over the years.

Before going further it will be noted that some recommendations that have arisen over the years have not been taken up or remain in the, to do basket. However, the work of the Research and Journal Working Group has certainly celebrated Indigenous knowledge and creativity through the recommendations it has addressed.

Underlying reasons for and support of standards

In a statement made to launch the WINHEC Journal in 2010, the authors and Professor Mark Rose point to the importance of the content of that particular Journal, in the following statement:

The articles are thought provoking and capture cultural messages while addressing a range of matters of relevance across our diverse nations. You know, very recently, this form of publication would not have been possible. However, because of a similarity of historical experience we are able to gain the clarity or pointers to address matters through a shared articulation despite each article being rooted in far off nations and quite different knowledge positions of the local Indigenous people. The articles bring not only knowledge complexity but an analysis of the importance of own language, information on sustainability, stories and papers that reflect a fundamental reciprocal connectedness or relatedness of all in the research domain and much more. The articles identify the centrality of ceremonies, songs, dance, metaphors and numerous other activities within Indigenous existence which can be drawn on within methodologically. The authors have made this possible. WINHEC has made this possible. I thank each for freeing their words and their stories to bring clarity of thought to many.

In this dispersed environment Indigenous standards promoting collaboration, among other matters were always required as an affirmation to the work being undertaken. Placed-based knowledge and language and the holders of same could only be central within project development, including the text of various documents, when Indigenous protocols and guidelines were honoured. Notably, responding to the diversity of those involved underscores the philosophy of WINHEC. This Indigenous ethos made it very rare to find a paper that was not accepted for publication or an action not openly discussed at a meeting or a denial of collaboration across the diversity of WINHEC. This critical component of the WINHEC ethos – or philosophy if you wish - called for respect of diversity, for respect of knowledge and for the respect of dispersed populations or individuals in the activities being undertaken for the advantage of Indigenous people.

The focus in WINHEC and therefore, the Research and Journal Working Group, has been the representation of the dignity, diversity, relatedness and dispersal of our peoples across the world as knowledge outcomes were produced. The development of the WINHEC Cultural

Standards supported and responded to this reality. The WINHEC Research Standards, while being consignant of all that has and, was occurring around its development, also responded to the committed and collaborative activity required to honour fundamental collaborative relationships to be found within many an Indigenous world.

These activities were undertaken by committed individuals, scholars and authors from across the world, a group of colleagues from across Australia and numerous 'blind' reviewers who herald from a large number of Indigenous nations. This respectful collaboration arises from the primary force of 'relationships' deep within the ethos of WINHEC which have been critical to the completion of complex, often joyous and sometimes, challenging work for our people. These relationships are also central to the work required in the disruption of negative theoretical and colonial power within higher education and research.

As Indigenous researchers operating within methodological approaches, relevant to WINHEC ethos, it is clear that reciprocal and collaborative relationships are a critical factor to our very existence and, therefore, are important within research. There are also relationships between all and between peoples as mediated within Western research, historical ideology and colonialism¹⁰. It is therefore suggested that when research is undertaken from a position of Indigenous knowledge and epistemology, it will celebrate and sustain Indigenous people and in doing so will challenge imposed research positions, as appears to have been evidenced in the activities of the Research and Journal Working Groups and the papers it has been able to disseminate. However, relationships as understood within Western research require vigilant work to challenge research that subjugates and oppresses through its inability to recognise, work with or represent diversity, knowledge and dispersal of peoples.

Summary

This paper has documented the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) with a focus on the research and later, Research and Journal Working group. The intent was to discuss the publication of the WINHEC Journal, discussion papers and other activities such as the development of the Research Standards while analysing the underpinning imperatives to such work. This paper also examined the complexity of progressing research, founded in local knowledge, aligned internationally to broader conceptions of Indigenous knowledge. This paper has addressed these topics and, in doing so, has endorsed the suggestion underlying this paper that research undertaken from a position of Indigenous knowledge and epistemology challenges the very core of Western knowledge and that this occurs when the concept of relationships is understood from many perspectives within research analysis.

Note: This article has been published in the *Journal of Indigenous Studies* (TJIS) and World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) Conference proceedings document and DVD.

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