How Universities can Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to Achieve Self-Determination and Improved Wellbeing

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Abstract

The right to self-determination is enshrined in international law, affirming Aboriginal people have the right to make decisions about matters that affect their lives, including meeting their social, political, cultural and economic needs. This paper explores the role of universities in supporting Aboriginal self-determination, including an examination of the importance of the social and cultural determinants of wellbeing and the impacts of assimilation on Aboriginal people's ability to live in accord with cultural traditions. Insights into how universities can create more culturally appropriate learning environments are also reviewed with a particular focus on the fundamental differences between Western and Aboriginal culture, pedagogy, epistemology, ontology, and axiology. The paper suggests that by undertaking a process of truth telling, universities will be able to create improved learning and research environments for Aboriginal students and staff that better support self-determination. By doing this, universities will leverage their unique position of influence to create improved wellbeing for Aboriginal people and the nation as a whole.

Keywords
Aboriginal, universities, self-determination, wellbeing

Key contributions
- This paper contributes to the understanding of the impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal wellbeing by exploring the importance of Aboriginal self-determination and how assimilationist policy has undermined this basic right.
- By comparing Western ways of knowing, being, and doing (and by inference, university ways of knowing, being, and doing) with Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing, this research uncovers major disconnections and therefore contributes to a better understanding of why Indigenous enrolment and course completion rates are below that for non-Indigenous students.

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- A review of key inputs into the generation of a culturally appropriate learning environment provides critical and practical insights into how universities can maximise the learning experience for Indigenous students engaged in the higher education journey.

Introduction

It has long been acknowledged that Indigenous Australians experience widespread, and greater, socioeconomic disadvantage and health inequality than non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017). To truly understand the causes of disadvantage experienced by Australian Aboriginal people requires an understanding of the broad impacts of colonialism on Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing. By recognising the negative effects of colonisation, we are able to better articulate the real causes of socioeconomic disadvantage and poor health. Zubrick et al. (2004) describe the pervasive and persistent negative repercussions of European colonisation:

> Many of the unique risks faced by Aboriginal peoples have persisted across generations. This reflects the fact that the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples has been profoundly shaped by the circumstances of the past, and most particularly by the events and conditions in Australia since colonisation. The enduring legacy of colonisation on Aboriginal life has been pervasive and affected multiple generations and extends to all dimensions of the holistic notion of Aboriginal wellbeing, including psychological, social, spiritual and cultural aspects of life and connection to land. This has resulted in serious additional risks to wellbeing, including unresolved grief and loss; trauma and abuse; violence; removal from family; substance misuse; family breakdown; cultural dislocation; racism and discrimination; exclusion and segregation; loss of control of life; and social disadvantage. (p. 99)

The quality of life experienced by Aboriginal Peoples post-European colonisation differs markedly from that experienced by traditional Aboriginal peoples:

> Imagine a world where people have all they need to be contented. Where they live to be old and are happy in mind, body, and spirit. That is the way our people lived for a very, very long time. Life could sometimes be hard, but our knowledge of the land meant that we always had what we needed. (Callaghan & Gordon, 2022, p. 22)

The first century and a half of European-Aboriginal relations in Australia can be characterised as a period of dispossession, physical ill-treatment, social disruption, population decline, economic exploitation, codified discrimination, and cultural devastation (Gardiner, 1999), with loss of life over the period 1788-1920 estimated to be somewhere between 80% and 96%

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(Harris, 2003, p. 81). Figure 1 provides a chronology of Aboriginal people's collective experience since 1788, including the impacts of government acculturation policies, racism, and transgenerational trauma, leading to socio-economic disadvantage and reliance on government programs, services, and programs that target symptomology rather than cause.

Figure 1

Chronology of Aboriginal People's Collective Experience
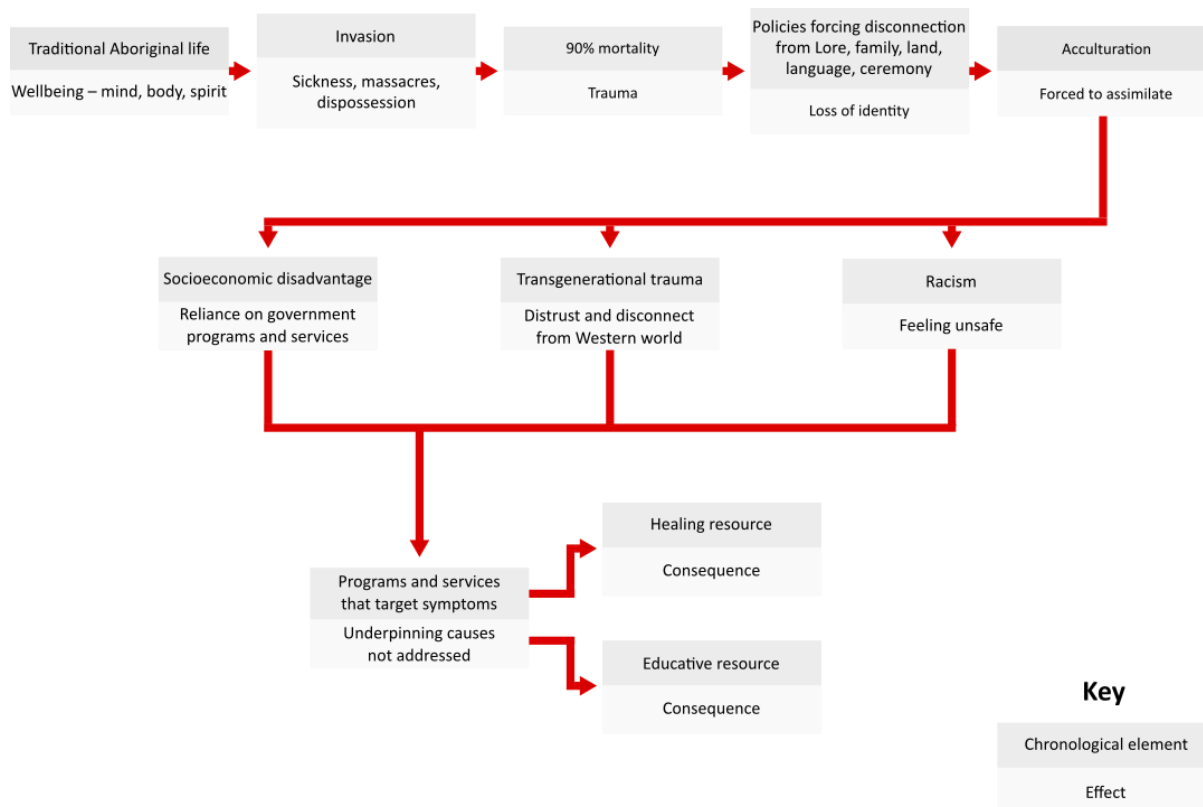
Note. Reprinted from *Marruma ginyaang ngurra ngarra (Creating a better place through knowing)* [Doctoral dissertation, by P. Callaghan (2022). University of New England, Armidale]. Copyright 2022 by Paul Callaghan.

On a daily basis, Indigenous peoples live with the consequences of Australia's failure to protect their basic human rights, and they continue to experience racial discrimination in many spheres of life (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.). The above chronology provides significant points of reflection on causes of the current socio-economic status (mortality, government policies, acculturation, racism, and transgenerational trauma) and what needs to be done to change this narrative.

The Productivity Commission's first review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap raises questions about whether governments have fully grasped the scale of change required

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to their systems, operations, and ways of working to deliver the unprecedented shift they have committed to (Productivity Commission, 2024).

Aboriginal self-determination

Self-determination is an ongoing process of choice to ensure that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people are able to meet their social, cultural, and economic needs. Without self-determination it is not possible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to fully overcome the legacy of colonisation and dispossession (Victoria Public Sector Commission, 2022). The right to self-determination is enshrined in international law under Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), as well as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966). Articles 3 and 4 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) confirm that Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination under international law. In January 2016, member of the government-appointed Referendum Council, Megan Davis, stated, "Australia has rejected self-determination – freedom, agency, choice, autonomy, dignity – as being fundamental to Indigenous humanness and development" (Davis, 2016, para. 14). This statement is supported by Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2007), who suggests that so-called 'self-determination' policy was only ever 'self-management,' given Aboriginal organisations created under the guise of self-determination have never had total autonomy from government control. These views are countered by Rademaker and Rowse (2020), who question whether self-determination has failed entirely, arguing that Indigenous people have consistently asserted sovereignty and have been 'self-determining' in their resistance to and engagement with colonising powers under all kinds of policy agendas. Davis, Moreton-Robinson, and Rademaker/Rowse's views relate to successive governments and government policies over hundreds of years. They also can be used to review the role of other influential agencies in Australia including the university sector.

In the context of self-determination, the question to be asked of universities is, "Do universities provide experiences for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people that ensure they are able to meet their social, cultural and economic needs?" In answering this question, it is important to understand the diversity that exists within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

> Aboriginal people come from a variety of different cultural and personal backgrounds and histories. Aboriginal people living in urban contexts may not display stereotypical images of what people look like or live like; however, urban identity is very strong and there is greater diversity than is often realised. Similarly, the diversity among people living in remote communities is often disguised by stereotypical and simplistic images and ideas which do not reflect the nuances and complexities of people's lives and identities in these communities. Practitioners need to have an awareness of the diversity of backgrounds, experiences and histories of different communities in order to work effectively with clients and their families. (Dudgeon & Ugle, 2018, p. 257)

Although diversity of Aboriginal communities is acknowledged from a general perspective, Indigenous social and cultural needs relate to body, mind and emotions, family and community, culture, country, spirituality, and ancestors (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). The social determinants model of health identifies several key elements of how social needs can be met. Social determinants of health refer to circumstances in which people are born, grow up, live, work, and age, and the systems put in place to deal with illness. These circumstances are in turn shaped by a wider set of forces, such as economics, social policies, and politics (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008). Social determinants are therefore shaped by the dominant culture in which Aboriginal people live and in the communities that control them. This can be problematic, as captured by Verbunt et al. (2021):

> Cultural determinants are associated with health benefits for Indigenous peoples . . .. Research related to Indigenous peoples has traditionally taken a social determinants of health approach, consequently positioning Indigenous identities in a deficit relative to non-Indigenous populations and framing poor health as a consequence of an inability of Indigenous people to meet socioeconomic standards and 'norms' of dominant cultures . . .. (p. 2)

> Further research is required to shift towards a multi-level understanding of the cultural determinants of health and to develop an Indigenous led evidence base around causal pathways. Such a shift would ensure priorities important to Indigenous peoples are captured in policy and practice. (p. 7)

The cultural determinants model of health identifies several elements of how cultural needs can be met. In the words of Ngaire Brown, in her paper presented at a 2014 Lowitja Institute Roundtable:

> Cultural determinants originate from and promote a strength-based perspective, acknowledging that stronger connects to culture and country build stronger individual and collective identities, a sense of self-esteem, resilience, and improved outcomes across the other determinants of health, including education, economic stability, and community safety. (Brown, 2014, cited in Lowitja Institute, 2020, p. 13)

Table 1 captures key social and cultural determinants identified for the Lowitja Institute.

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Table 1

Aboriginal Social and Culture Determinants

Social Determinants	Cultural Determinants
• Early childhood development • Education and youth • Employment and income • Racism • Housing • Environment and infrastructure • Interaction with government systems and services • Law and justice • Alcohol, tobacco and other drug dependency • Poverty • Food security	• Connection to country • Family, kinship and community • Indigenous beliefs and knowledges • Cultural expression and continuity • Indigenous language • Self-determination and leadership

Note. Adapted from *We nurture our culture for our future and our culture nurtures us: Close the gap. A report prepared by the Lowitja Institute for the Closing the Gap Steering Committee for Indigenous Health and Equity*, by The Lowitja Institute, 2020, p. 15 (https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/ctg2020_report_final.pdf). Copyright 2020 by Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee for Indigenous Health Equality. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution – NonCommercial – ShareAlike 2.5 Australia License

For First Peoples, development centred on measures of national accounts, such as Gross Domestic Product, has often been problematic, with the dominant development models widely criticised for privileging non-Indigenous ideas of progress and perpetuating colonial processes and power relations (Thomassin et. al., 2020). Concepts such as 'life projects' and 'hybrid economies' are significant alternatives to this model. 'Life projects' allude to the possibility of Indigenous peoples defining the direction they want to take in life, on the basis of their awareness and knowledge of their own place in the world (Blaser, 2004, p. 30). This approach supports the inclusion of cultural determinants when identifying ways to better support Aboriginal self-determination.

Assimilationist policy and its impacts

The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997) reports on assimilationist attitudes and policy. In 1937 the Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities was held, attended by representatives of all the States (except Tasmania) and the Northern Territory. The conference resolved that:

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. . . this conference believes that the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end. (Aboriginal Welfare, 1937, cited in Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p. 21)

In 1953, Paul Hasluck, the newly appointed federal Minister for Territories stated:

Assimilation means, in practical terms, that in the course of time, it is expected that all persons of aboriginal blood and mixed blood in Australia will live like the white Australians do. (Hasluck, 1953, p. 16)

The aim of assimilation was to make the 'Aboriginal problem' gradually disappear so that Aboriginal people would lose their identity in the wider community (Working with Indigenous Australians, n.d.).

The process of assimilating involves taking on the traits of the dominant culture to such a degree that the assimilating group becomes socially indistinguishable from other members of the society. As such, assimilation is the most extreme form of acculturation (Pauls, 2024). British ancestry or birthplace has long been associated with the 'core' or 'dominant' culture that provided this nation's language, law, and institutions to which those from different backgrounds have long been asked to conform. This group holds the reigns of cultural and economic power and to that extent may be seen by themselves and others from different cultural backgrounds, as 'privileged' (i.e., the dominant culture) (Forrest & Dunn, 2006).

According to the Australian Department of Home Affairs (2022), English, as our national language, connects us and is an important unifying element of Australian society. The Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner (2009) casts a different light on the English language being a unifying element of Australian society.

In terms of cultural heritage, the loss of Indigenous languages in Australia is a loss for all Australians. For the Indigenous peoples whose languages are affected, the loss has wide ranging impacts on culture, identity and health. Cultural knowledge and concepts are carried through languages. Where languages are eroded and lost, so too is the cultural knowledge. This in turn has potential to impact on the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples. There is now significant research which demonstrates that strong culture and identity are protective factors for Indigenous people, assisting us to develop resilience. (p. 67)

The Australian Department of Home Affairs (2022) further states that English language proficiency is a key contributor to better educational and employment outcomes and social

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participation levels. The need for Aboriginal people to conform to the dominant culture in terms of language is clear.

With regards to the dominance of law in Australia, the Australian legal system developed from the legal system of Britain, which was brought to Australia as part of the process of Britain setting up a colony in Australia, beginning in the 1770s (State Library NSW, n.d.). As of 30 June 2023, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners accounted for 33% of all prisoners (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023), whilst the share of population in Australia in 2021 by Indigenous status was approximately 3.2% (Statista, 2022). It is clear the justice system is also impacting negatively on the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples.

There are many institutions that knowingly and unknowingly support and force assimilationist practice onto Aboriginal people. It is critical for universities to reflect on this behaviour, review current systems and practice, and ensure remedies are made where necessary to create learning experiences that support Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing rather than undermine them.

The role of universities in Australia

Deloitte Access Economics (2020) report that in 2018, universities in Australia employed 131,200 fulltime equivalent employees, contributed $23.2 billion to gross domestic product, facilitated the nation's largest service export, and drove growth in productivity and living standards through the research they produce and graduates with which they furnish the labour market.

According to the Australian Government (2023), higher education contributes to sovereign capability through the development of advanced expertise, critical technologies, and ensuring strong cultures of scholarship and critical enquiry, whilst Patfied et al. (2023) posit:

> Teaching and research are the two core functions of Australian universities. But teaching has long been treated as the poor cousin of higher education. It is generally considered low status, given little professional recognition, and sometimes even seen as the domain of those academics who are not successful researchers. (para. 1-2)

> Teaching lies at the heart of creating a high-quality learning environment and producing a high calibre of graduates. Yet the teaching of university students has long been devalued in Australian higher education. (para. 6-7)

Beck (2020) suggests a common critique of Australian universities today is that they operate as if they are corporations. The pursuit of endless sales in the form of international student enrolments appears to be their principal purpose, rather than the pursuit of learning and

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knowledge. This view is reinforced by Traphagan (2023), who believes the reconfiguring of institutes of higher education as businesses trying to compete for customers to whom they sell their 'goods' is profoundly damaging to the educational endeavour by turning a forum of ideas into a forum of goods and services.

Universities Australia (2024) is committed to a number of focus areas to strengthen the advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia's universities relating to course completion, post-study outcomes, career pathways, culturally safer learning environments, and recognising Indigenous value systems and knowledges in teaching and research. Being able to do this in a sector that has been subjected to the forces of dominant culture for many decades, in addition to recent pressures to operate like a business, is complex.

Dudgeon and Walker's (2015) discussion of the role of psychology in Australia and the negative impact that certain disciplinary theories and practices have had on Indigenous Australians concluded as follows:

> Existing institutions and structural mechanisms that have been part of the colonising apparatus need to recognise that Indigenous people's health and SEWB [the social, emotional, spiritual and cultural wellbeing of a person] are inextricably linked not only to their collective rights to land and natural resources, but also to the maintenance and application of traditional knowledges and contemporary cultural practices.

> We have demonstrated how psychology's disciplinary and professional bodies have, in the process of determining the parameters of mental health and SEWB, discounted the knowledges, perspectives, and distinctive values of Indigenous Australians and their conception of health and wellbeing. In doing so, the science of psychology has contributed to oppression, marginalisation, transgenerational loss, and trauma. (p. 292)

In post 'Voice Referendum' Australia, many Aboriginal people are feeling let down by fellow Australians, as echoed in a keynote speech given by Stan Grant to The Australian National University Crawford Leadership Forum in October 2023, where he said:

> Our nation is set in stone: one word, no. Whatever hope there may be for a different Australia, I likely won't live to see it. This morning, I am hearing the word: no. That word without love. That word of rejection. That word from which no other word can come. This morning in the darkness I am hearing the cold-hearted no of a country so comfortable it need not care. (Butler, 2023, para. 6-7).

Now is a perfect time for the Australian university sector to review whether, like the science of psychology, it is contributing to oppression, marginalisation, transgenerational loss, and

trauma. Perpetuating colonial processes and power relations is behaviour universities need to be aware of in order to ensure they are not part of a system that continues to assimilate Indigenous peoples. A starting point of reflection is to consider how Aboriginal culture, pedagogy, epistemology, ontology, and axiology differs from university/Western world dominant culture and practice that Aboriginal people are forced to navigate.

Culture – There are many definitions of culture. For this paper, culture is about the meaning of historically based beliefs, values, and practices that are actively constructed and shared by people within communities (Raeff et al., 2020). Table 2 identifies differences in Aboriginal and Western cultural world views.

Table 2

Differences between Aboriginal and Western Cultural World Views

Aboriginal World View	Western World View
Spiritual beliefs embedded in all aspects of life	Spirituality may or may not be important
Story, song, dance and art the platform of learning	Science and evidence-based knowledge form the platform of learning
Society is interrelated – connectivity to all things is central to being	Society is sectionalised – connectivity is based on need
Flow-ers: adept at reading their environment and flowing with it	Achievers: doing is important; adept at changing their environment to service need
Identity comes from connections and culture (Lore, language, country, family, and ceremony)	Identity comes from jobs and material possessions
Time is non-sequential and observed through nature; lifestyle flows with time	Time is ordered and monitored through gadgetry; lifestyle fights with time
Authority based on cultural knowledge and use of that knowledge to help others	Authority based on roles assigned through systems
Contentment achieved through meaningful relationships and upholding of the Lore	Contentment achieved through achieving goals

Note. Reprinted from *The Dreaming Path: Indigenous Thinking to Change your Life* (p. 134-135) by P. Callaghan & P. Gordon, 2022, copyright 2022 by Paul Callaghan.

Pedagogy – Pedagogy is a term used to describe the relationships and interactions between teachers, students and the learning environment and the learning tasks (Murphy, 2009). Table 3 captures key differences between Aboriginal and Western pedagogy.

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Table 3

Differences between Aboriginal and Western Pedagogy

Aboriginal	Western
Culturally safe	Based on dominant culture
Shared learning	Hierarchical learning
Assessments emphasise reflectiveness	Assessment emphasise competence
Identity and relatedness critical	Identity and relatedness unimportant
Reflect Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing	Reflect Western ways of knowing, being and doing
Whole of life approach	Discipline specific
Connection to land, family, and community critical	Land, family, and community irrelevant
Focus on process	Focus on content
Based on telling of story	Based on delivery of theory and facts
Practical/experiential emphasis	Practical/experiential at times
Supports student motivation to give back to community	Supports student motivation on career
Yarning circles	Lectures/workshops
Place based learning	Learning has no relationship with a place of group of people
Intergenerational where Elders are critical	Generational where Elders are not involved

Note. Information sourced from Antoine et al. (2018) and Leroy-Dyer (2018).

Epistemology – Epistemology is the study of knowledge, asking "questions such as: What is knowledge? How do we know something? What does it mean 'to know?'" (Couper, 2020, p. 275). It further asks, what are the sources of our knowledge, what do we know, and what differentiates knowledge from wisdom and opinion? From an Aboriginal perspective, epistemology is about ways of knowing and how we think about it (Brodie et. al., 2023). Key differences between Aboriginal and Western epistemology have been captured in guides to education, including Antoine et al. (2018) and HZT4U (2024). Table 4 summarises these differences.

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Table 4

Differences between Aboriginal and Western Epistemology

Aboriginal	Western
Relationality and interdependence (to each other, country, and the spirit world)	Individualism
Integration of the sacred and secular	Spirituality avoided
Emotional, spiritual, cognitive, and physical elements of knowledge are inseparable and viewed as critical to human development	Emotional, spiritual, cognitive, and physical elements of knowledge are addressed in isolation
Based on key elements of Indigenous knowledge (personal, oral, experiential, holistic, conveyed in narrative or metaphorical language, and linked to observation of the surrounding natural, social, and supernatural environment)	Based on key elements of Western knowledge (written, theoretical, compartmentalised, conveyed in formal language, and evidence based)

Note. Information sourced from Antoine et al. (2018) and HZT4U (2024).

Ontology – Ontology, or the study of being, creates the framework for how we, as individuals, connect in societies and make sense of the reality in which we live (Edelheim, 2014). From an Aboriginal perspective, ontology is about ways of being and how we perceive reality (Brodie et al., 2023). Key differences between Aboriginal and Western ontology, identified by Callaghan and Gordon (2022), are outlined in Table 5.

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Table 5

Differences between Aboriginal and Western Ontology

Aboriginal	Western
Country is a spiritual entity	Country is an asset to be leveraged
The Lore (story, knowledge, and rules) underpins all aspects of life	The economy (GDP, wealth generation, business sustainability, consumerism) underpins many aspects of life
The importance of story as a vehicle of learning	Story seen as a creative past time
Country is the highest place of learning	Universities are the highest place of learning
Interconnectedness of all things	Separation of all things
Success defined by relationships	Success defined by achievement of goals usually related to materiality and status
Behaviour driven by responsibility	Behaviour driven by rights
Diversity underpinned by unity	Diversity undermines unity
There are many truths (acceptance of different stories about a specific point of focus)	There must be one truth (acceptance of only one story about a specific point of focus)

Note. Information summarised from Callaghan and Gordon (2022).

Axiology – Axiology addresses the nature of ethical behaviour. In philosophy, axiology is a term that deals with ethics, aesthetics, and religion (Killam, 2013). From an Aboriginal perspective, axiology is about ways of doing and our values and beliefs (Brodie et al., 2023). Table 6 summaries key differences between Aboriginal and Western axiology that were identified by Callaghan and Gordon (2022).

Table 6

Differences between Aboriginal and Western Axiology

Aboriginal	Western
The importance of Country, the spirit ancestors, and other spirit entities	Spirituality is seen as a choice
The importance of story	The importance of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
The values of love, respect, humility, and "always share" are taught from a young age	Numeracy and literacy are taught from a young age

Note. Information summarised from Callaghan and Gordon (2022).

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander epistemology and ontology is rarely considered to be a viable tool in the dominant education system (Kerwin & Van Issum, 2013). Leroy-Dyer (2018) posits that Aboriginal pedagogy is tied to decolonisation and that the academic world has not been welcoming to Aboriginal ways of thinking, understanding, and approaching knowledge, partly as these approaches are not considered to belong to existing theory. This might explain why, despite significant progress in recent decades, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians remain significantly under-represented within the Australian system of higher education. In 2020, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments in higher education as a percentage of domestic enrolments was 2.04%, well below population parity, whilst nine-year completion rates for Indigenous students commencing studies in 2012 was 49.4%, compared to 72.2% for non-Indigenous students (Universities Australia, 2022). The challenges faced by Aboriginal students is not just related to undergraduate students, as explained by Guntarik and Daley (2017):

> Postgraduate candidates are expected to situate their research in a distinct theoretical paradigm, and there may be problems for Indigenous candidates for several reasons. Some Indigenous candidates believe they are being asked to locate their research primarily in a context grounded in Western epistemological and pedagogical foundations because they are studying at Western institutions. (p. 13)

The problems faced by Aboriginal students undertaking higher degrees is highlighted by the thoughts of PhD student, 'Aunty Doris' (Guntarik & Daley, 2017).

> Aunty Doris commented on the relevance of providing citations to every knowledge claim Indigenous candidates make in their exegesis. She asked, "How do I know what I know?" (personal communication, October 22, 2015). The inference was that her knowledge had been passed down from her ancestors. This meant also that she may not always be able to provide exact citation in terms of who, when, and in what publication because the knowledge was passed on through oral history. As we will illustrate later in this article, Indigenous cultural practices can rely on alternative sources of legitimacy to validate knowledge claims. (p. 411)

PhD student, Paul Callaghan, also highlights his discomfort in navigating the academic process (Callaghan, 2022).

> I am privileged to have been given knowledge that places me at a very senior level in the Aboriginal system of learning (equivalent to the highest level in the western academic structure) and yet, here I am, feeling I have to prove I am meritorious in a western system that requires me to follow somewhat prescriptive structures, meet standards and demonstrate competence in a value system that is not mine. The pressure to conform to western academic practice has been conflicting and challenging

to say the least. There have been countless times in the development of this exegesis where I have felt dumb, stupid, overwhelmed and out of my depth. I find myself feeling like an outsider looking in, wanting acceptance but knowing that won't happen unless I embrace the western lens of scholarly conduct that I am forced to uphold if I want to be afforded the academic tick of approval. (p. 336)

Among the core issues faced by Indigenous Australians in higher education and highlighted by the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC, 2006), were low numbers of Indigenous staff (both academic and non-academic), the uneven quality of Indigenous research programs, the poor recognition given to Indigenous studies, the lack of visibility of Indigenous cultures and knowledges on campus, and low levels of participation of Indigenous people in university governance and management. The most important factors identified as leading to premature withdrawal from studies included financial pressures, social or cultural alienation caused by the academic demands of study, and insufficient academic support. A review of recent literature identifying barriers faced by Indigenous students in universities found that little has changed during the past decade (Pechenkina et al., 2011).

Creating a culturally appropriate learning environment

Biermann and Townsend-Cross's (2008) research suggests that for Aboriginal teachers and learners in tertiary education, the pedagogical space needs to incorporate: embedded Indigenous philosophy; self-analysis and reflection in classroom activity; cultural safety; respectful and conducive shared learning; outside the classroom delivery using the concept of a learning circle to emphasise non-hierarchical structures; group based assessments that acknowledge personal responsibility; assessment that emphasises reflection on whole learning experience of content, process, and purpose; formal and informal cultural learning; and foundation on the broad principles of identity and relatedness couched in the contextual values of reciprocity, inclusiveness, nurturance, and respect.

Cultural issues play an important role in the learning environment, including the social or cultural alienation that some students may experience because of clashes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous socio-cultural values reflected in teaching styles and pedagogies, course content, and levels of available support. As a result, although many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students succeed in higher education, for many others, attending university remains an isolating experience associated with feelings of exclusion from the mainstream academic environments (Pechenkina et al., 2011).

Nakata et al. (2008) contends that because the tertiary classroom is a contested knowledge space, Aboriginal learners not only need to learn Western academic literacy skills and discipline specific conventions to succeed, but importantly they also require assistance to learn a skill set that will enable them to negotiate the cultural interface of Western academic

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understanding and Aboriginal knowledge. Part of this teaching and learning approach needs to understand that students are often unprepared. Historic inequity is realised in the form of alternative pathways and Indigenous specific strategies/programs; however, these are deficit based and assimilationist, with students expected to engage with the meanings of knowledge with Western disciplines. Navigating these systems causes frustration, alienation, and emotional entanglement, and consideration is needed of what specific skills Indigenous learners need that will support Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing (Nakata et al., 2008).

In addition, Curtis et al. (2012) state that a productive learning environment needs to understand the importance of learning that happens outside the lecture theatre (or screen), the importance of culturally attuned support, the value of bonding opportunities between students, the need for culturally specific safe spaces, and the need for peer mentoring. Curtis et al. (2015) further suggest that academic success for Indigenous students requires multi-faceted, inclusive, culturally responsive, and engaging teaching and learning approaches by educators and student support staff, including Indigenous congregational space, additional study resources, and support that services pastoral and academic needs. It is therefore no surprise that the ingredients for successful university engagement with Indigenous higher education, as described by Anderson et al. (2008), involves: highly dedicated staff; optimising the degree of comfort, cultural and academic, of beginning students; the role and centrality of Indigenous centres; and keeping institutes Indigenous support mechanisms constantly under review (Anderson et al., 2008).

These critical success factors are supported by the earlier work of Di Grigorio et al. (2000), which reinforces the need to maintain a positive learning environment in ensuring academic success in addition to assessing the student's past educational experiences (identifying a preparatory and support program), understanding why a student has enrolled (supporting motivation), broadening the selection criteria in the recruitment process (understanding life experience), dealing with little problems before they become big (nurturing relationships that enable early intervention), orientation (creating comfort and a safe space), and remembering culture matters (ensuring curriculum, pedagogy and lecture staff are culturally appropriate). Pivotal to creating a culturally appropriate learning environment is the appointment of suitably skilled staff. In many instances, this involves recruiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Literature on the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in the higher education sector is scarce, however the following article relating to school educators (Australian Institute for Teaching and Schools Leadership, 2021) can be applied to the university learning space:

> In practice, the precise role of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educator will vary greatly depending on the needs and priorities of their school. Some roles may

relate mainly to student learning support across learning areas, while others focus more on cultural teaching and learning. While the specifics of roles and responsibilities may vary, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators bring a cultural lens and significant social capital to education settings, which often includes teaching in local languages. Pastoral care, family support and community liaison are also crucial aspects of many roles, to facilitate genuine connection with communities and families. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators often also provide professional learning for non-Indigenous teachers, including formal induction processes or mentorship, or post-school follow-up with students enrolled in further education. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators work with teaching partners, such as classroom teachers, community members and school visitors, to provide culturally responsive educational experiences that enable students to engage with and access the curriculum, participate in learning and achieve positive learning outcomes. (para. 7)

Staffing is critical in establishing a learning environment that is culturally safe and supports self-determination. Recruiting the right people to university roles requires significant expertise. It is not enough to appoint someone because they identify as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage is something that is personal to the individual and does not require a letter of confirmation. However, a person may be asked to provide proof or confirmation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage when applying for Indigenous-specific services or programs using three working criteria, which are being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, identifying as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and being accepted as such by the community in which they live, or formerly lived. All of these things must apply. The way you look or how you live are not requirements (AIATSIS, 2022).

In a model he developed called, 'The 6Ls,' Ngemba Elder, Uncle Paul Gordon, talks about the importance of having 'Lore' (story, knowledge, and rules) before Love.

> Love is a really important part of Aboriginal society. Now a lot of people from other religions say to me, "I think you have got it wrong. I think love should be first," and I say to them, "There has been many things done around the world under the banner of love that have been destructive. People have gone out into the world thinking other people needed their love and instead of making the world better they have destroyed some good things . . . The first thing we have to know before we can help anybody, is their story. We have to know the Lore relating to their story, that is, we have to know the rules, responsibilities and obligations relating to their story. Once we know their story, then we can act in love because we will respect their story and make sure what we do fits in with that story. What we do will be right." (Callaghan & Gordon, 2014, p. 38)

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If Aboriginal staff are recruited to coordinate programs and services without a thorough understanding of the Aboriginal story, they may inadvertently contribute to assimilationist practice, undermine self-determination, and become a barrier to what the university is trying to achieve, as identified by Dr Grieve-Williams, adjunct professor at RMIT University, as follows (Day & Gibbs, 2022):

> Aboriginal people are actually very badly affected by this. Universities and governments are employing so-called Aboriginal people without due diligence. High-level positions, huge salaries, great opportunities through Indigenous Business Australia, all of that's being gobbled up. There's no penalties or checks and balances. These numbers are increasing . . .. It's a huge problem but the figures are difficult to assess. (para. 16)

> Australian universities employed bogus Aboriginal academics as professors, right up to pro and deputy vice-chancellors. The interesting thing I'm finding with my research is that Aboriginal people always recognise them, they always know they're not Aboriginal. Aboriginal people have been saying, "Hold on, that person isn't one of us," and nobody takes any notice. (para. 24)

It is important that universities undertake significant due diligence in the recruitment of Aboriginal staff with responsibilities for programs that require high level cultural competence.

Moving beyond belonging

It is likely that the Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing identified in this paper are not understood or embedded in university research and learning systems as they need to be. Furthermore, it is highly likely that in many instances, Aboriginal students are forced to acculturate to the cultural, pedagogical, epistemological, ontological, and axiological expectations of Western systems in order to succeed and in doing so are subjected to a process of assimilation that undermines self-determination. Graham and Moir (2022) warn of the pressure of 'belonging' to a university as follows:

> 'Belonging' has become a buzzword used by institutions to seemingly demonstrate how they seek to include students and help them 'fit in' to specific cultures and contexts of learning. A sense of 'belonging' may be important for some students at an emotional level; however, in the context of the neoliberal university, we argue that focussing on this concept may have the effect of encouraging students to assimilate to the dominant culture. More subtly, it could be noted that this is part of an ongoing process of inculcating students to the beliefs, values and normative behaviours associated with neoliberalism, arguably reproducing and exacerbating many of the social challenges threatening education, democracy, ecosystems and ultimately our ability to survive on this planet . . . which functions to prioritise domestication and conformity to social and

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economic expectations of a higher education driven by an agenda of employability, entrepreneurialism, and acquisitive individualism. (p. 1)

Just as missions, reserves, and stations were designed to erase people's cultural identity (AIATISIS, n.d.), the question must be asked, although not designed to do so, do our universities, do the same? Students who successfully complete higher education courses may have increased competence to engage with Western world systems, but there is no guarantee they have an increased ability to identify, advocate, and pursue goals built on principles of self-determination.

This assertion can be demonstrated by a personal story described by Paul Callaghan (Callaghan & Gordon, 2022):

> When I was thirty-four years old, I was the great Australian success story. I had three qualifications, two jobs, three kids, two cars, a house, and was married to the love of my life. I was living the dream. Despite all of this, on the day of my thirty-fifth birthday I sat on some steps at my workplace and cried. . . . The psychiatrist diagnosed me with major depression and an anxiety disorder. . . . One day I sat by the water's edge thinking, "This is the moment to end it." The thought of ending my life was a compelling one. (p. 4-5)

This personal story demonstrates that despite doing all the right things by Western standards of success, Paul Callaghan was not able to achieve a state of wellbeing. His story changed when he was 'taken bush' to learn his culture.

> In a world far beyond the constraints of the brain, my spirt awoke and danced as I connected to a place beyond that which is imaginable. It was a place of safety, and it was a place of peace. I was infused by profound wisdom and felt unconditional, infinite love. I liked this place . . . The cornerstone of this profound, life-changing transformation was meeting Uncle Paul . . . and although I have only consumed a small morsel of the banquet of cultural learning that he has shown me, I will be forever grateful for the nourishment it provides. (Callaghan & Gordon, 2022, p. 6-7)

Almost a quarter of all First Nations people have reported having a current, long-term mental health or behavioural condition (ABS, 2019). The fact that Aboriginal people are reluctant to attend health services (Shahid et al., 2009) suggests that reported health issues, including mental health issues, underrepresent reality.

Social and emotional wellbeing is the foundation of physical and mental health for Indigenous Australians. It is a holistic concept that encompasses the importance of connection to land, culture, spirituality, and ancestry, and how these affect the wellbeing of the individual and

community (Gee et al., 2014). For many Indigenous Australians, good mental health is indicated by feeling a sense of belonging, having strong cultural identity, maintaining positive interpersonal relationships, and feeling that life has purpose and value (Dudgeon et al., 2014; Dudgeon & Walker, 2015). Factors that support the connection to mind and emotions are education, agency, and strong identity (PM&C, 2017).

For universities to fulfil their responsibilities to Aboriginal students, the learning environment needs to support the creation of a sense of belonging, support the development of cultural identity, nurture positive relationships, help students identify culturally embedded views of purpose and value, and build a student's personal agency. This involves universities understanding their role in supporting a learning and research environment that enables Aboriginal people to access or address the social and cultural determinants of health.

In addition to achieving better understanding, it is also important for universities: to develop appropriate indicator frameworks that emphasise Indigenous peoples' inherent values, traditions, languages, and orders; focus on the interplay between Indigenous and non-Indigenous systems (social, political, economic, colonisation, industrialisation) that result in a series of impacts such as racism, discrimination, migration to urban centres, youth suicide and disconnection to land and culture; and reflect Indigenous peoples' visions and understandings of wellbeing (Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 2006).

Conclusion

The effects of colonisation on Aboriginal people have been pervasive and have affected multiple generations. Assimilationist policy and practice continues to supress and undermine Aboriginal self-determination, which is seen as critical in fully overcoming the legacy of colonisation and dispossession. Universities can play a major role in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, but to do so will need to look inwardly and ask themselves, "Do we provide experiences for Indigenous people that ensure they are able to meet their social, cultural, and economic needs?" This process of reflection requires an understanding of the social and cultural determinants of health in addition to understanding the differences between the Aboriginal world and Western world in terms of culture, pedagogy, epistemology, ontology, and axiology.

This paper suggests that by undertaking a process of truth telling, universities will be able to create improved learning and research environments for Aboriginal students and staff that better support self-determination. By doing this, universities will leverage their unique position of influence to create improved wellbeing for Aboriginal people and the nation as a whole. How well this is done by individual universities is dependent on intent, understanding, commitment, and willingness to break away from assimilationist practice.

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