



| VIEWPOINT

## SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES IN OUR UNIVERSITIES

PROFESSOR TOM CALMA AO



When Malera/Bandjalung woman Margaret Williams-Weir walked into the sandstone quadrangle of Queensland University in 1957, she made history as the first

Aboriginal person to be accepted into an Australian institution of higher education. Imagine that. It had taken more than a century from the time Australia's first university, the University of

Sydney, had opened its doors in 1850 for a First Nations person to be permitted to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by tertiary qualifications.

It was also an important first step on the transition to an Australian education system that honours and benefits from the unique expertise of Australia's First Nations peoples.

The late Dr Williams-Weir ultimately completed a doctorate entitled *Indigenous Australians and Universities: A Study of Postgraduate Students' Experiences in Learning Research* at the University of New England. Today, First Nations people are found in every professional cohort in Australia.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander astrophysicists, health researchers, doctors, dentists, hydrologists, politicians, teachers, engineers, architects and lawyers are living proof of our capacity for hard work and intellectual rigour needed to excel at university. They are all enhancing their field with the unique perspectives of their peoples and cultures.

Like other Australian institutions, our universities have historically been unwelcoming and even hostile to First Nations peoples' higher education aspirations.

The 'colour-bar' which kept Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students out of university has now been replaced with an enthusiastic adoption of reconciliation by most Australian higher education institutions. Today, our universities are actively engaged in recruiting more First Nations students and improving their

experiences when they enrol.

Australian universities have strongly increased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments in recent years with 70 per cent more enrolled today than in 2008. However, there is still work to be done. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise 2.7 per cent of Australia's working age population, they make up just 1.6 per cent of university domestic student enrolments – up from 1.2 per cent a decade ago.

The ongoing challenge for universities can also be seen in the low percentage rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who complete their bachelor degree; in 2006 this stood at only 47.3 per cent compared to 73.9 per cent for other students. While many First Nations students have flourished at university, racism, homesickness, poor secondary educational opportunities, low expectations and financial constraints have all contributed to others either not enrolling or failing to complete their degree.

Individual universities have responded to this challenge with varying degrees of success by implementing internal policies, plans and programs to lift participation and attainment by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In other words, making the university environment a welcoming one.

As part of their efforts, many have developed Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) in conjunction with Reconciliation Australia. University RAPs support universities to create culturally safe and responsive environments to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment and retention rates. RAPs also aim to increase the knowledge and pride for First Nations cultures and achievements

among all staff and students.

What has been missing until fairly recently is a coherent sector-wide initiative that binds all universities together with common goals.

A strategy launched by the universities' peak body, Universities Australia, is designed to fill that gap. Universities Australia's Indigenous Strategy 2017-2020 intends to 'lift participation and extend our institutional insight and responsiveness'.

The Universities Australia initiatives and Reconciliation Australia's RAPs fit neatly together, one supporting the other.

RAPs challenge universities to acknowledge the fact that too often they preference colonial-based knowledge and pedagogies and ignore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' perspectives. This is despite ample evidence that inclusion of First Nations' perspectives increases the engagement, and retention, of our students and improves overall educational outcomes.

Such perspectives will also provide non-Indigenous staff and students with a more rounded, comprehensive and truthful curriculum and learning environment. For example, Aboriginal knowledge of ecology and astronomy would greatly enhance these two disciplines if applied.

Our people have been calling for more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander historical and cultural perspectives to be included in the educational curriculum but, 169 years after the birth of Australia's higher education sector, there has been a very slow uptake of 'decolonising' our education system.

Despite this slow start, RAPs and the Universities Australia strategy are having positive impacts on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

students in the tertiary sector.

Western Australia's Curtin University is a case in point, beginning its 'formal' reconciliation journey in 1998 with the signing of a Statement of Reconciliation and Commitment. Ten years on, it's the first Australian teaching and research institution to develop and implement its own RAP.

The University's latest Elevate RAP contains a raft of initiatives including on-Country visits for staff and students as part of the Indigenous Cultural Capabilities Framework; a Student Internship Program that provides employment at Curtin for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; and a partnership with the Nowanup community to progress a proposed Nowanup Bush Campus.

The Curtin RAP formalises the embedding of First Nations knowledge and perspectives into its governance structures and teaching and learning activities. The RAP supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers to further develop their capability and impact.

Opportunities for First Nations students in higher education are not just limited to Australia. The Charles Perkins Trust and the Roberta Sykes Foundation both offer scholarships to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to attend the world's most prestigious universities including Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard. Since 2010, the Charlie Perkins Scholarship Trust has supported 19 scholars, on 22 scholarships to Cambridge and Oxford.

The work of these Foundations and of Reconciliation Australia, Universities Australia and individual universities are making a difference – ensuring that the historical exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars from higher

education is consigned to the past and the full potential of our peoples can be realised.

Imagine a world where all Australian children are respected and offered the absolute best choices in education and future employment; imagine an Australia where every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child has the right and opportunity to realise her or his dream of excellence.

And imagine every Australian university student benefiting from the expertise and ingenuity of the world's oldest living cultures.

These aspirations are at the heart of the reconciliation process and Australian universities must work harder to meet the targets set by Universities Australia and their individual RAPs.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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