CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Indigenous Employment and Supports

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Preface

This is one in a series of case studies to enhance graduate employability. The theme of this case study is:

- Indigenous employment and supports

The 10 other case studies in the series are on the themes of:

- Employment through multi-national corporations
- Competitive sport, athletes and employability
- Entrepreneurship (graduates in start-up businesses and graduates employed by entrepreneurs)
- Government as employer
- Private higher education and employability implications
- The role and contribution of higher education career development centres
- Employability for-profit business endeavours
- Generalist disciplines and employability
- Focus on graduate attributes
- Emerging careers (preparing students for careers that do not yet exist)

The project took place between January and November 2014. The study was designed to investigate, disseminate and enhance graduate employability. Knight and Yorke (2004) are the world-renowned authorities on graduate employability. They define employability as, "a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations" (p. 9). In a large part, the role and function of these case studies is to make the implicit strategies and supports for employability explicit for heightened sustainable impact.

Throughout the project, four stakeholder groups have been fully consulted:

- Graduates
- Students
- Employers
- Educators/Career Development Centre professionals

The project data was collected through surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups.

- 1500 surveys were distributed. 821 surveys were submitted for a 55 per cent response rate. 705 surveys were fully completed.
- 86 in-depth interviews/focus groups were conducted, fully transcribed and analysed.

This case study on the context of Indigenous employment and supports is based on interviews and focus groups with 14 people across the stakeholder groups of employed graduates, students in internships, educators, career development professionals and employers from six different universities. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.

INTRODUCTION

Before putting a spotlight on Indigenous graduate employability, there is a requisite to acknowledge that Australia's Indigenous population is under-represented in the university system and consequently in the graduate body. Universities Australia (2014) reports: "According to the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, Indigenous people comprise [sic] 2.2 per cent of the overall population, but only 1.4 per cent of student enrolments at university in 2010, including only 1.1 per cent of higher degree by research enrolments. Staffing levels are also low, with 0.8 per cent of all full-time equivalent academic staff and 1.2 per cent of general university staff in 2010 being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people." (Indigenous Higher Education section, paragraph 1).

One of the noteworthy facets of Indigenous employability highlighted in this case study is that there are two significant aspects of Indigenous employability. First, developing cultural competency to improve the employability of Indigenous graduates; and second, developing cultural competency to improve the employability of non-Indigenous graduates who wish to work in Indigenous communities. Each community is different and stakeholders interviewed agreed that a critical element of successful employability outcomes was where educators, employers and Indigenous communities worked together from the very beginning of initiatives.

Support for Indigenous cultural competency was a critical element of the Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) by the Australian Government's Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations. The report stated, "It is critical that Indigenous knowledge is recognised as an important, unique element of higher education, contributing economic productivity by equipping graduates with the capacity to work across Australian society and in particular with Indigenous communities." (Bradley et. al, 2008, p.33)

In response to the Bradley Review, Universities Australia and the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) have collaborated to produce two documents: the *Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities (2011a)* and the accompanying *Guiding Principles for Developing Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (2011b).

The definition of cultural competency used in this case study is that used in the *Guiding Principles for Developing Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (2011b, p. 3).

"Student and staff knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australian cultures, histories and contemporary realities and awareness of Indigenous protocols, combined with the proficiency to engage and work effectively in Indigenous contexts congruent to the expectations of Indigenous Australian peoples." (p.3)

INTRODUCTION

Universities are currently implementing the key guiding principles of the *Best Practice Framework*. This includes developing *Reconciliation Action Plans* to formalise their commitment to developing mutually beneficial partnerships that work towards closing the employment, health and education gaps for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The 2012 *Behrendt Report* recommended universities use the *Best Practice Framework* in all spheres of a university connected to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including in discussions about graduate attributes. (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012)

This case study has drawn on the lived experiences of students, graduates, employers and educators to make connections between principles of the Universities Australia & Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (2011a) *Best Practice Framework* and graduate employability. Two of the five guiding principles have been highlighted by interviewees in this case study.

- "All graduates of Australian universities will have the knowledge and skills necessary to interact in a culturally competent way with Indigenous communities."
- "Universities will operate in partnership with their Indigenous communities and will help disseminate culturally competent practices to the wider community."

(Indigenous Cultural Competency Framework section, para. 2)

Case study aims and objectives

- Students – To increase awareness of the importance of engaging in employability initiatives and build-in formalised support for these initiatives.
- Higher Education – To develop well-rounded graduates with employability attributes.
- Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees within Indigenous contexts.

Keywords

- Community connection
- Power of place
- Cultural competency
- Networks and partnerships
- Internships
- Empowerment
- Real world knowledge and experience
- Links with industry

TRUE STORIES OF INDIGENOUS GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

In the interview data, there were a number of success stories of Indigenous employment. Some of these success stories are documented below.

Fred's story

"Fred (pseudonym) completed a Masters in Fisheries Management, and subsequently returned to his community to become the senior manager in the natural resource management area; now he is head of the Ranger Program. Fred is the first Indigenous person from that community to ever achieve this. It should be pointed out that he *returned* to his community – he had to actually *leave* his community in order go back educated. The notion of having to leave communities to receive an education is the type of issue being faced." *An interviewed educator*

Role models and family support

"Originally from South Australia, I was lucky to have my paternal grandmother as a positive role model in my life. She ensured I attended school every day, had the right educational capacity to attend and complete high school, undertake teacher training in Adelaide and become a role model for my own community. I have always had positive support and positive role models in my life who pushed me to be a teacher enabling me to go back and work with my own mob and empower them through education. It has been a life-long process for me, continuously upgrading my skills and qualifications from the diploma level to degree level to Masters level, and now hopefully, progressing into a PhD. But you always need the support of family around you and positive role models in your life; you'll find a lot of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are success stories generally have those positive influences in their life.

The support to get my PhD has also given me a lot of opportunities and challenged me, including the opportunity to complete a secondment and be mentored during my career. Ultimately, I think my ability to be cited as a success story is due to a combination of both study and the work opportunities I was able to experience." *Interviewed Indigenous postgraduate student*

Oxford Scholarship

"A student completing an Aurora anthropology internship at a Native Title Representative Body (NTRB) learned of the Roberta-Sykes Indigenous Education Foundation Scholarships through The Aurora Project. She was ultimately awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to attend the University of Oxford. Rebecca's selection is a historic moment as she is the **first indigenous Australian** to win the preeminent scholarship for Australian graduates. So after starting her journey as an Aurora intern, she has successfully completed an MPhil in Material Anthropology and Museum Ethnography at the University of Oxford in 2013." *Interviewed employer*

A few numbers

"Aurora has placed 49 Indigenous interns (37 legal, five anthropology and seven social science) at various organisations working in the Indigenous sector. Ongoing we have 12 Indigenous Aurora alumni working in the field, currently or in the past, in a locum and/or fulltime capacity." *Interviewed employer*

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORTS?

A theme that came out strongly in the interviews was the *power of place*. This was articulated in a number of ways. First, the importance of place-based pedagogy in understanding local communities and partnering with them; and second, the power of place in understanding the issues that are particular to the place you study and live.

Place-based pedagogy has its roots in John Dewey (1910) and the progressive education movement and seeks to ground learning in real world contexts. This may involve immersion in the community through internships, service learning or problem solving around local community issues. Interviewed educators provided various examples of this including the following.

• A remote training hospital is conducting considerable research, in particular health issues affecting the Indigenous community. Postgraduates working at the hospital are benefiting from their university studies and their work experiences at the hospital. This has the flow-on effect of enabling the regional university to offer niche placements.

• The links we have to the growth area of oil and gas mining means our students have greater opportunities to commence their practical from the start of their studies. For example, students have greater access to the reefs from Darwin; this differs from students in a major city like Sydney where those local links/networks may not exist.

The *power of place* in understanding the issues that are part of the place in which you study and live was highlighted in the interviews in various ways. Interviewees spoke of moving away from community for study. Sometimes graduates wanted to return to their communities but lack of employment opportunities hampered this.

• "There is a long history of Aboriginal families in central Australia having a relationship or links with places like Adelaide and that impacts on children when they grow up. They return for a period of time but if they want to pursue employment opportunities or further study, invariably a lot of them go back down south; that's just the history of the place." *Interviewed Indigenous graduate*

• "One of the big unemployment factors in Australia at present is the inability of the younger generation to go to regional remote areas in pursuit of employment. However, if a student enrols with a regional university, they make a commitment to shift themselves out of their comfort zone and expose themselves to the realities of relocation." *Interviewed educator*

Networking and collaborating as a component of *power of place* was viewed as important by higher education staff, industry links and employers.

• "There has to be a reason why people want to stay in remote communities. There are no jobs there. If there is no local economy in these remote areas, people will move to larger towns so there is the need to invest in remote communities; develop an industry or a job market; get out in those communities and tailor the education and training around those needs; create those employment opportunities." *Interviewed educator*

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORTS?

- "Programs like RATEP[1] have very strict agreements regarding the employability of their graduates. This teacher education program has been designed to ensure that employment opportunities in a remote community are aligned with a student from that remote community. This allows the Education Department to work with the university to find out when students will graduate and ensure that a position is available in these very small communities for the graduates when they complete their Bachelor of Education. This is a perfect example of how we work with the stakeholders." *Interviewed educator.*

Approach to achieve aims and objectives

- **Students – To increase awareness of the importance of engaging in employability initiatives and build-in formalised support for these initiatives.**

  There were some key messages provided by students and graduates. One of these was the importance of internships and the opportunities they afforded. Academic staff were seen by some to play an important role in mentoring students and providing access to networks that promote employability.

- **Higher Education – To develop well-rounded graduates with employability attributes.**

  Higher education institutions are developing Reconciliation Action Plans to create respectful and supportive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. They also have a critical role in fostering links to communities and employers.

- **Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees within Indigenous contexts.**

  Employers who were prepared to partner with higher education institutions developed partnerships within communities that fostered meaningful relationships.

Challenges and their impact

- Obtaining sufficient numbers of placements to provide *real world* experiences.

While interviewees espoused the benefits of internships, a universal challenge is sourcing enough industry placements, internships and work-integrated learning opportunities. The resultant impact can create an inequitable situation for students as not all can be provided with these opportunities. Interviewees had some suggestions for how this could be addressed.

- "Each round, we rely on the demand that comes to us from the various host organisations, so we actually go into a round never knowing how many interns are required." *Interviewed employer*

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1 "RATEP is a community-based education pathway" which "enables Indigenous people to remain within their local community whilst completing the requirements of the Bachelor of Education at a RATEP site or Thursday Island campus." (James Cook University, 2013)

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORTS?

- "I do think there should be more interrelationships between the universities and the workforce. I was part of a study some years ago that was about having a further connection with the communities, in particular our Indigenous communities. An audit of what's needed in the community should be conducted followed by communication with the university about how we're going to recruit students to the university to fill those gaps, and finally, the relationship between the community and the employers in that community. So a three-way relationship where all have responsibility for ensuring that we have graduates along with important opportunities." *Interviewed Indigenous educator*

- "I think it comes back to communication. Going out and communicating in an open, transparent manner in regards to what the aspirations of the community are; universities need to be inclusive in that process as well as government and industry." *Interviewed Indigenous graduate*

- Educators suggested that better links between career opportunities in the region and what the university can actually provide are necessary. Furthermore, research participants suggested heightened industry input to help develop appropriate career paths at university. The oil and gas sector was used as an example where there is potential for a partnership that could make use of facilities in these areas.

Establishing and maintaining networks

A challenge mentioned by students and graduates was how to find out what opportunities were available for internships and future employment options. They spoke about how the message is communicated. Career fairs were not always seen as helpful. The use of social media and the opportunities and information provided by interested lecturers *were* considered helpful.

- "I generally found career fairs to be very unhelpful. If you want to go into the military, then they were useful but it would have been really nice to have a social science career fair with department specific areas to see what people are actually doing." *Interviewed graduate*

- "For students doing the Development Studies major we had a Facebook group. The creator of the page really supported that Facebook group by linking articles to people and linking opportunities. We were able to connect, to have forums and discussions which I found to be really helpful. Someone that you know would advertise something and you felt comfortable talking to them directly, and they'd hear about things to pass on. Particularly people who had graduated and were trying to reach out to people who were undergraduates in terms of upcoming graduate programs that were specific for people studying particular majors, that was helpful. But it would nice if the university facilitated something like that on their websites." *Interviewed graduate*

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORTS?

Empowerment and self-determination

According to interviewees, a critical factor in employability success was the attitude of the individual student. Those students who volunteer, are willing to learn, and are open to new opportunities and therefore are more successful. Students and higher education staff spoke of the importance of these transferrable skills and the challenges associated with developing them if students are not prepared to be proactive.

- "I guess it comes back to our philosophy about how we interact with students, and our main message is that sure, you might be Indigenous, you might face some things differently to non-Indigenous students, but when it comes down to it in the *real world* out there, you're expected to come to work on time, get your work finished on time and learn to take responsibility for yourself." *Interviewed Indigenous educator*

Successes and their impact

Internships

Internship programs offered by universities were seen as critical to graduate employability. Internships were provided in a number of different ways. Some were embedded in degree programs while others were provided by organisations, such as those run by the Aurora Internship Program which offers opportunities for interns to gain on the ground experience in the Indigenous sector. In other instances, students were encouraged to volunteer to develop skills through internships.

- "In some areas it works really well where there are internships or there are opportunities for students to go and work in the mid-year break or the big break. That fosters a pathway for them to get experience and then some relationship happens; there is some responsibility for the employers to make sure that happens. They're feathering their own nest by hoping graduates are able to come work for them." *Interviewed educator*

- "I didn't think about it much before I graduated, and then realised 'Oh there's a recession happening. I haven't done any internships.' I had just been focused on financially supporting myself through university, working in casual jobs." *Interviewed graduate*

Graduates and employers spoke about the particular types of internships they considered that had made them successful. They noted internships that were structured, provided sufficient guidance, and were well supported and monitored as contributing to success.

- "Prior to commencing their placement, all interns receive a copy of the *Handbook for Interns* which contains the *Intern obligations and code of conduct and professional ethics for interns* (now completed online) outlining what is expected whilst on placement; discipline-specific sections for interns as well as broader native titles issues; and cross-cultural communication. Prior to departure, the Placements team briefs interns by telephone/Skype on our expectations of them and appropriate protocol to observe while on placement. Through this process, we manage the expectations of the interns." *Interviewed employer*

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORTS?

Experience within community

Graduates who had experience living and/or working in particular communities were seen as more employable in those communities.

- "It is crucial that graduates have an understanding of the community and Indigenous culture when applying for jobs in Indigenous regions which is also an important employability factor. For example, a hiring school may say 'No, I know I don't want that teacher who came up from the Gold Coast who doesn't know our community. I want that teacher who knows 'Aunty Connie', someone who is aware of the protocols of this community.' This is an employability factor for our students; that they know that they can apply for a position in Town X, and when they meet with the Principal they can say 'Aunty Connie taught me last year' or 'I spent a lot of time in Town Y and I understand what is expected of the community and the protocols that are expected'." *Interviewed educator*

Partnerships with industry

Specific activities that fostered partnerships with industry and employers were seen as contributing to successful outcomes.

- "With the help of a specific organisation, we are growing our engineering faculty - it's growing very steadily and consistently and I'd like to say that the quality is there thanks to the industrial input." *Interviewed educator*
- "Several of our top students visited a remote community last year with their subject and subsequently applied to teach

there in their first year – this was not the norm previously. We are inviting them back to speak to us as well as visiting their classrooms this year. They understood what was expected of them while they were a student, and now they can share with current students its significance now they're an employee." *Interviewed educator*

Role models, mentors and networks

Role models and mentors were cited as contributing to success. Role models and mentors may be based at higher education institutions, in communities, volunteer organisations or programs such as The Aurora Internship Program.

- "It certainly helps to have an Indigenous area where people can come and talk and talk to Indigenous academics." *Interviewed Indigenous educator*
- "It seems to go full circle. A more discrete part of my role is to assist graduates of the program once they have finished. We help them if they are employable and perhaps have not received a job offer. We support them by introducing them to a lot of our contacts within the area. It's just part of being an alumni of the program, and trying to match them up with the right contacts. We don't formally offer that as a service, but we certainly help to try to connect them with the right people, because we're not an employment agency as such, but I'm constantly giving advice and often referring graduates onto the right people to get a foot in the door." *Interviewed employer*

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORTS?

Empowerment

- "I think it's also about helping students to understand the power of themselves. I don't know how to say this because we come from a community where no one is higher than the other. You don't stand out. Whereas if you are going out there to get a job, you've got to sell yourself. So it's empowering them with the language skills and all those things that are needed to sell yourself out there." *Interviewed Indigenous educator*

- "It's changing the whole culture of how a lot of our people think. To have an understanding of really what the power base is and that's about being responsible and having the confidence, and the knowledge and skills, to be able to do what you want to do." *Interviewed Indigenous educator*

- "I think our approach, being one of empowering, works well. It's difficult but we're here to support students, but basically the students are the ones that have to do it. If it's not the right time for you, then you go away and return when ready. Make people really think about taking that responsibility for taking up the opportunity or whatever they need to do." *Interviewed educator*

- "The Aspiration Initiative's (TAI's) Academic Enrichment program is a very innovative and special program designed to enhance academic achievement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander high school students, simultaneously paving the way to university. It focuses on teaching them about life skills, resilience and an understanding of the education system and the world, so they can become empowered by knowledge and make informed decisions. The Aspiration Initiative website is a really powerful tool encouraging Indigenous students to succeed by connecting them to inspiring stories of other students' journeys into higher education and opportunities, such as Scholarships, that can allow them to achieve their career aspirations." *Interviewed marketing coordinator*

ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

Look for internship opportunities.

INTERVIEWED MARKETING COORDINATOR

- "I always encourage students who are coming to the end of their degrees to consider undertaking an internship, because it will allow them to develop new skills on the ground, get a taste of the work environment and will connect them to a network of people working in their area of interest: all of these factors can potentially help recent graduates get a paid position. Our internships provide a legitimate career or study-based learning experience in a vocational placement that enhances learning and will inform and inspire their future study and work life."

Seek positive mentoring.

INTERVIEWED INDIGENOUS GRADUATE

- "It is those positive experiences that put these young Aboriginal people on the right path. If they have positive experiences, are introduced to positive people who can support them, then they're well on the way to achieving their aspirational goals.*"*

Transferrable skills.

INTERVIEWED MARKETING COORDINATOR

- "My advice for graduates about to enter the work environment, and people thinking about doing an internship, is to have an open mind, a *can do attitude* and always be willing to learn. Organisations recognise value when they see that interns are open to learning new skills, especially practical ones. In my own experience, having a business and development studies background, I never thought I would be doing technical website work. But I can say I have learnt and gotten a lot of value and knowledge from working in this area. Don't be scared of trying new things or combining different degrees, even if they don't seem related. Having a mix can allow you to have a more holistic view and can open new job opportunities. It's all about following your passion and developing and learning skills that will allow you to make a difference in the areas that you are passionate about."

INTERVIEWED EDUCATOR

- "It is also about helping students to understand the power of themselves.*"*

ADVICE FOR GRADUATES AND EDUCATORS

Advice for Graduates

Maintain connections with alumni and university staff.

INDIGENOUS EDUCATOR

- "I know I'm still in contact with students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, so it's informal but it's happening."

Make use of social media to source opportunities.

INTERVIEWED GRADUATE

- "I've worked for an organisation, which links volunteer programs and communities. There's a Facebook group that shows opportunities. I know about four or five friends that have ended up in jobs in remote communities because of that network."

Advice for Educators

Seek reciprocal relationships with communities.

INTERVIEWED INDIGENOUS EDUCATOR

- "Having Elders on campus is a great resource for students to gain support and increase awareness of Indigenous community work. *Aunties* and *Uncles* on campus is also cost effective as they generally want to do this off their own backs. Having these people, face-to-face, that can actually be a wonderful tool, a resource for all of our universities to help people understand what is required to go and teach in an Indigenous community. They want to now come and use the space where they can teach their own mob. They can teach our mob, the students, and they can teach non-Indigenous mob about culture, using the space."

WHAT'S NEXT?
SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Higher impact sustainability can be accomplished through dedicating more financial and human resources to internships, placements and work experiences. In the survey research, the literature was systematically reviewed to derive strategies for which there was empirical evidence for positive impact on employability. Twelve strategies emerged (listed here in alphabetical order):

- capstone/final semester project
- careers advice and employment skill development
- extra-curricular activities
- graduate portfolios, profiles and records of achievement
- international exchange
- mentoring
- networking or industry information events
- part-time employment
- professional association membership/ engagement
- social media/networks
- volunteering/community engagement
- work experience/internships/placements

The survey questions were articulated as follows on the four stakeholder versions of the surveys:

- Students – What strategies are you using to improve your graduate employability?
- Graduates – What strategies did you use to improve your employability?
- Higher Education Personnel – Which of the following employability strategies do you provide for students?

- Employers – Which of the following strategies undertaken by students does your organisation value when recruiting graduates?

By a substantive margin, the strategy to be selected on the greatest number of survey responses was:

Work experience/internships/ placements

This strategy set was indicated on 74 per cent of student surveys, 74 per cent of graduate surveys and 87 per cent of employer surveys. It was selected on a minority of higher education personnel surveys. This difference between stakeholder groups was addressed in many of the 86 in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted after the surveys. All of the interviewed higher education personnel support the idea and value of work experience, internships and placements. However, these employability strategies are expensive and time consuming.

One of the strongest themes across the project was that more resources should be invested in work experience, internships and placements, in order to have a sustainable impact on graduate employability development. In the context of Indigenous employment and support, this case study has shown some of the unique aspects of internships in community contexts.

READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reading and resources:

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For further information and resources:

http://graduateemployability.com

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- Charles Darwin University
- James Cook University

READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The list of names and organisations is a partial list, as some interview and focus group participants requested that they remain anonymous.

Discussion questions:
To use this case study for educational purposes

- How does your institution utilise the *power of place* to enhance employability?

- Access the *Reconciliation Action Plan* for your institution. What are the links between reconciliation and graduate employability? What can you do to promote reconciliation?

- How can educators, communities and employers foster networks and partnerships for students that improve employability?

- What strategies can be used to increase the participation of Indigenous knowledge holders in higher education?