

Implementing a Whole-of-University Approach to Improving Indigenous Access and achievement

Background

A major focus of the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (the Review) was a “whole-of-university” (WoU) approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student success. The Review report included two recommendations (10 and 11) on this topic (which should be read in conjunction with each other) as well as several case studies of universities taking such an approach.

Discussions between ATSIHEAC members, Departmental officers and universities have identified that there remains some uncertainty within institutions about the rationale, scope and good practice models for developing and implementing such an integrated approach.

The purpose of this paper is to draw on these discussions, and set out the key principles and drivers for successful whole of university approaches. It is not a model for change, in recognition of the fact that individual institutions will need to develop their own approaches, in keeping with their priorities, missions and operational contexts.

What is a ‘WoU’ approach

The Review was clear that there is no one correct WoU approach. Nonetheless it concluded emphatically that change is dependent on support and leadership at the highest levels and that Indigenous staff and student issues need to be seen and treated as core university business. The Review envisaged a partnership, in which well supported Indigenous units and leadership are essential, both in the provision of support and a culturally safe environment and in assisting faculties and mainstream support services to better meet the needs of Indigenous students.

Successful whole of university approaches will have at their core Indigenous leadership of the agenda with shared responsibility for *outcomes*

It should be noted at the outset that there are many different, and successful, models of Indigenous Education Units (IEUs). IEUs play a valuable and critical role and we are not wishing to enforce a particular model for IEUs. Some IEUs have a strong strategic focus, strong teaching and research programs and have driven significant change agendas across their institutions leading a WoU approach in partnerships with University senior executives and faculties to deliver successful outcomes. However, IEUs in some institutions are not resourced well to do this. The WoU approach is best understood as a shift away from relying solely on IEUs to deliver Indigenous outcomes but instead:

- establish a shared and coordinated responsibility (and accountability) that includes stronger roles for and relationships between the Vice-Chancellors, senior university leadership, IEUs, university councils, and management at school and faculty level all contributing to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff
- transforming the current relationships so that faculties and mainstream support services have clear responsibility for discipline-specific actions and outcomes, led by Deans, with IEUs providing strategy development as well as support, facilitation and overall leadership within the institution.

Specific practices, structures and mechanisms will vary depending on how an institution structures its WoU framework. However ATSIHEAC has identified a number of broad strategies which are common to the more successful approaches:

- the commitment and support of university Vice-Chancellors and senior university leadership to make improving Indigenous participation and success a cross-institution priority
- making Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander success a central part of university planning across multiple domains
- identifying, supporting and promoting an active Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership within the university
- recognising Indigenous knowledges and ensuring the university is a culturally affirming place
- providing stable and sustainable resourcing.

This overall approach and focus is similar to the way universities have brought attention to bear in other areas of high strategic importance, such as Teaching and Learning, Research and Internationalisation. Essentially each of these areas involves executive leadership and responsibility, good governance, cross-university accountability, investment, and the existence of one or more specialist units. The multi-armed approaches in these areas have been successful and provide a platform or model for the way any individual institution might develop their WoU approach in respect of Indigenous higher education.

The advantages of a WoU approach

Discussions with universities identified a number of recurring perceived advantages of taking a WoU approach. These were:

- an overall lifting in the effort devoted by the university to addressing institutional barriers to enrolment, participation and engagement, as faculties focused on the issues as well as Indigenous leadership
- a sharper focus resulting from this engagement – it was recognised that while all faculties faced some common problems and challenges, a number of issues were specific to particular disciplines
- a clearer focus on and support to ensure all IEOs move from a (possibly unfairly perceived) focus on providing services to individuals to a more strategic and broader horizon of how to lead and drive change across the institution
- removing the excuse that ‘someone else’ was tackling the issue of Indigenous participation. Related to this shift there was also recognition that just because a university did well in one discipline (e.g. health), that did not reduce the pressure on other disciplines to consider how they could improve participation
- greater clarity of roles, for example IEOs maintaining their strong focus on Indigenous rights and advocacy while ensuring complementary and specific strategies for each discipline, and stronger links to employment strategies, better council engagement and better use of other processes such as university performance monitoring arrangements and KPIs
- a positive funding and resourcing impact as the shared responsibility model encourages individual partners, units, faculties, directors and executives to add the weight of their own budget to the achievement of the KPIs
- a human resource and human capital impact as Indigenous staff are better engaged, thereby raising morale, increasing staff retention and, through improved reputation, assist the university in becoming preferred site of employment within the sector.

Key elements

The following suggested key elements are drawn from ATSIHEAC’s discussions with universities and its own consideration of how to improve access. In isolation, none of these are sufficient to support successful WoU approaches – all are necessary elements.

Acknowledge culture

It is essential not just to 'be seen' but 'to act' and assure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, staff and communities that attending and succeeding in higher education is entirely consonant with their heritage.

Higher performing institutions have taken concrete actions to validate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures including:

- giving explicit support to respecting Indigenous culture
- strong leadership
- clearly defined responsibilities and processes for tracking achievement and comprehensive planning
- recognising Indigenous knowledge and ensuring that universities recognise and celebrate the positive contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, and value Indigenous knowledge, peoples, cultures and scholarship.

Clear governance and accountability arrangements

This element requires the commitment and support of university leaders including university Chancellors, Councils, Vice-Chancellors, other managers and senior academic staff, to making Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander success a core part of the operations of the whole university, and entering into collaborative dialogue with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, students and staff.

As with any aspect of university performance, achieving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation requires structures and processes such as:

- policy – describing what the institution is aspiring to achieve, and how
- a formal strategy - some institutions have multiple approaches, such as distinct employment and education strategies together constituting an overall framework
- leadership and governance – defining who is responsible for showing the way and holding the university accountable. Within the institution, this should be located such that real influence can be exercised. It should address roles of Council, senior management, schools and faculties.
- devolution – selective responsibilities must be taken up at the faculty and school level
- procedures – describing the how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concerns are reflected in enrolment, recruitment, human resource and other strategies.
- accountabilities – clear lines of responsibility so that policy and administrative leadership for Indigenous issues is aligned with arrangements for any other whole of university activity but takes into account Indigenous leadership. There should be a clear chain of accountability within the faculties reporting up to the DVC, and the Vice Chancellor.
- monitoring – effective but light-touch KPIs and tracking arrangements to enable easy assessment of change and, for example, generating friendly competition between the faculties. Higher performing institutions use strong monitoring and reporting including regular reports on the impact of strategies by faculties and use external rather than internal assessments of the impact of programs/units. Key measures include recruitment and retention rates and achieving KPIs is the responsibility of Deans.

Some institutions also use funding arrangements to sharpen incentives, for example levying schools to pay for central units which has a double impact – giving the schools an interest in getting good 'value' and sharpens central units' focus on meeting the schools' needs.

Policy leadership

Policy leadership requires identifying and supporting an active Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership within the university, including establishing a critical mass of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders at the Council, senior management and academic levels, and enabling their input into planning and decision-making.

Structural and reporting arrangements at universities need to reflect the commitment to achieving a WoU approach to the highest levels of the institution. This must be supported by internally accountability arrangements, so that progress towards a WoU approach can be recorded, measured and analysed.

Most institutions already devote significant resources and focus to “Indigenous issues” but these can be fragmented, uncoordinated and risk dissipating scarce knowledge away from the most likely-to-impact strategies. Better performing strategies appear to avoid the centralise/de-centralise dichotomy and focus on supporting a policy community in which Indigenous leaders with cultural expertise and knowledge of Indigenous networks, knowledge of programmes align and join up with those who have complementary policy knowledge and expertise in areas such as Indigenous employment, teaching and learning and research.

Establishing this community requires a shared set of goals and approaches that provides sufficient detail on key areas of performance, where all stakeholders understand the context, agenda and strategy in particular in relation to their institutional/administrative role (eg Indigenous employment, research, teaching and learning).

Processes

Business processes should point to the alignment in the points above and integrate and embed Indigenous higher education in university business practices including strategic planning, resource allocation and performance reporting. When effective, these hold people to account in a meaningful way, provide for routine monitoring and continuous improvement.

Practices and processes will necessarily be tailored to individual institutional approaches but a core good practice would be expected to include strong linkages to other plans, such as employment strategies and Reconciliation Action Plans.

Capability

A range of improved capabilities in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous leadership is required to achieve change. Indigenous leadership need to propose and exercise strategic actions to coordinate with peers, with non-Indigenous and Indigenous staff and stronger links with other players, such as educational, professional and community networks. Non-Indigenous staff need to develop more active measures within schools. In both cases these might require support and a commitment to capacity building.

The interviews at universities found that non-Indigenous staff can be overly cautious about advocating and supporting change inappropriately, feeling that it is ‘not their role’. IEU staff may also need to ‘let go’ and welcome a diversity of approaches to achieving greater participation, even if it is not ‘the way we would do it’.

Connecting with communities

Strong, positive links with communities and community leaders are essential. This engagement with communities and elders needs to be driven by senior university leadership as part of a WoU approach, ensuring that their ideas and concerns are brought to the table. Similarly, senior Indigenous university leadership need to ensure that senior university leadership understand how to communicate with Indigenous communities and making sure that community consultation is appropriate rather than tokenistic.

The varied programmes, initiatives and other activities addressing Indigenous disadvantage often share a goal of ‘improving participation’ via schools and higher education. Universities cannot stand apart and passively await delivery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Higher performing institutions we spoke to were engaged in a range of activities to build relationships such as:

- negotiating MOUs with the local language group

- supporting local elders to revive local languages through a language dictionary
- establishing or working with community Elders groups or having Elders in residence
- outreach, preparation and access arrangements such as:
 - encouraging school children (including younger children) to aspire to higher education, including at lower primary
 - induction programs, and
 - working with HSC students to improve outcomes