Opinion Piece

Unseen Inequities:
The Role of Leadership in Addressing Structural Barriers to Education in Australian Universities

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Abstract

The lack of diversity in leadership positions within the Australian university sector has been a persistent issue, with predominantly older, white, male leaders holding power and shaping the future of higher education. While student demographics have become more diverse, the leadership of academic institutions has not kept pace with these changes. Therefore, as student expectations and attitudes change, university communities are encouraged to (re)consider their commitment to proactively addressing the structural inequalities that continue to impact the journeys of the students we seek to serve. Nevertheless, activist universities—those that proactively and visibly seek to lead on matters of socio-political importance—are few and far between. The referendum to change the constitution to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the establishment of a Voice to Parliament is an example where change has the potential to tangibly address educational inequality. The positions that institutions choose to take (or not), in relation to the attitudes held by a considerable proportion of our student cohorts, presents a strong argument for courageous leadership at all levels of our universities to lead, educate, and advocate for social good.

Keywords

Diversity, Leadership, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Activist university, Student demographics, Student experience

Power within the Australian university sector resides with an exceptionally homogenous group of leaders. Our governing councils, vice-chancellors, and senior executives are predominantly white, mostly male, and are primarily in their 50s and 60s (Calderon, 2022; Croucher et al., 2020; Soutphommasane et al., 2018). This reality does not paint a particularly diverse picture of the leadership driving the agenda and shaping the future of higher education in Australia.

This homogeneity represents a status quo maintained since Australia's first universities were established in the mid-to-late 1800s. And, given the origins of academia in Australia, the sustained lack of diversity is not surprising. The mission and purpose of Australia's first universities were primarily concerned with the education of the colonial elite (Gale & Tranter, 2011). Later, broader members of the colonies' wealthy classes were admitted, with women not entering universities until 1881 (albeit considerably earlier than in the United Kingdom) (Gale & Tranter, 2011). Furthermore, it was not until 1923 that the first international student was accepted into an Australian university, well before overseas cohorts became crucial to the sustainability of Australia's higher education system (Horne, 2020). A further important point of reflection is that it was not until a century after the establishment of Australia's first university that Dr Margaret Williams-Weir became the first Aboriginal person to gain an undergraduate qualification from an Australian university (Fredericks & White, 2018).

Today, our student communities are much more diverse. At present, more than a quarter of our students are international, while a steadily increasing number of domestic students have a disability, are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, are from low socioeconomic backgrounds, or are coming from regional and remote areas (Universities Australia, 2022). This relatively recent shift in student demographics, one that enriches our academic communities in the here and now, represents a stark contrast to the predominantly homogenous leadership of Australia's academic institutions. This is not to say that universities and their leaders have not responded well to this student diversification;

in fact, most have become more responsive to the needs and aspirations of historically excluded and marginalised student communities.

However, educational inequities still plague Australia's education system. As the current Federal Minister for Education reminds us, it remains the case that "where you live, how much your parents earn, whether you are Indigenous or not, is still a major factor in whether you are a student or a graduate of an Australian university" (Clare, 2022). Nevertheless, what tends to remain unseen or ignored by many university leaders is that many of these inequities are structural in their nature and are first apparent long before future students even consider going to university. For example, university leaders are conscious of the need to increase the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education. So, the question often asked of Indigenous leaders and staff within Australian universities is "how do we attract more First Nations students to study at our university?". However, little attention is paid to the structural barriers that produce the educational inequities that lead to the "under-representation" of Indigenous students in our universities.

For example, in examining student achievement in reading, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students fall well behind their non-Indigenous peers within Australian primary and secondary schools. In Year 3, 83% of Indigenous students are at or above national minimum standards compared to 96.4% (13.4pp difference) for non-Indigenous students. Throughout the remainder of students' educational journeys, this gap widens: Year 5 (17.7pp); Year 7 (18.9pp); and Year 9 (24pp) (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022). Ultimately, such outcomes lead to only 57% of Indigenous students successfully completing high school (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022), a key enabler for transition to university study. Despite this gap in achievement being measured and evidenced since 2008, little has changed, and concerning data such as these are rarely factored into discussions about increasing access and participation for Indigenous people in higher education. Nevertheless, when examining the underlying causes of this achievement gap, it becomes apparent that systemic issues underpin these outcomes, not the individual failings of students or their families.

As a sector, our narrow focus on building cultural capital and aspiration (Naylor & Mifsud, 2020), while assuming deficits within Indigenous communities, overlooks the systemic issues faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students throughout the entirety of their educational journeys. Despite evidence that Indigenous students hold aspirations similar to their non-Indigenous peers, they do not often view university as a viable option for themselves (Gore et al., 2017). When considering the racism faced by Indigenous school children (Moodie et al., 2019), the low expectations held by teachers towards Indigenous students (Sarra et al., 2020), and the systemic bias that steers Indigenous students towards vocational education pathways (Helme, 2005), it becomes apparent why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may have lower rates of transition to, and participation in, university studies. These immense structural issues lead to many Indigenous children perceiving themselves as low achievers (Dandy et al., 2015). Despite such perceptions, Indigenous students still perceive themselves more capable of success than their teachers do (Dandy et al., 2015). Closer analyses of achievement gaps, particularly in reading, reveal that inequities in school funding are the primary drivers of the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students nationally (Song et al., 2014). However, evidence in Australia, New Zealand, and Europe demonstrates that these gaps can be significantly reduced by fair distribution of resources among schools to achieve better outcomes for minoritised student cohorts (Song, 2011).

As universities, we can make meaningful impact in addressing such inequities. After all, we educate the teachers who teach Indigenous children, we develop leaders in education who can drive transformative change, and we conduct the research that informs actionable solutions. Moreover, we have the financial capacity to actively engage with schools, communities, businesses, and not-

for-profits to address the systemic barriers faced by historically excluded communities in accessing higher education. Of course, Indigenous education is not the only domain that should command our attention; socioeconomic factors, location and isolation (Smith et al., 2019), accessibility (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020), and gender are still major drivers of educational inequality nationally and internationally (OECD, 2015).

Despite this opportunity, some leaders in Australian universities tend to focus inward and limit their institutional responsibilities to their campus boundaries, rather than taking a broader, outward looking, activist perspective that recognises the potential for positive impact beyond their immediate sphere of influence. It is crucial to address educational inequality and tackle issues such as racism through teaching and learning, research, community engagement, and public relations leadership. However, taking such bold steps involves a significant risk that many leaders are unwilling to take. Given the homogeneity of university leadership in Australia, perhaps this is unsurprising.

As universities' leadership and governance tentatively navigate such discussions, new challenges simultaneously emerge that force universities to (re)imagine their purpose in the context of rapidly accelerating social change/instability (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2022) and shifting expectations of students. At present, just under 60% of students in Australian universities are 24 years old or younger (Universities Australia, 2022). Unlike previous generations, this Generation Z (born after 1996)—like the Millennials before them—are bucking historical trends toward conservative politics as they get older (Cameron et al., 2022). This was most evident in Australia's 2022 Federal election which saw just under 26% of Gen Z voting for Australia's main conservative party, with 67% reportedly voting for centre-left or left parties. Gen Z (and Millennials) in Australia see environmental issues, particularly climate change, as the major concern facing society. They also view inequality, racism, discrimination, and mental health as important issues (Deloitte, 2021; Deloitte, 2022; Leung et al., 2022). Furthermore, many young people are now living "pay check to pay check", worrying about their ability to retire comfortably, and becoming increasingly aware of the widening wealth gap between the rich and the poor (Deloitte, 2022). The apparent rejection of conservative politics among younger voters may be traced back to the misalignment between these concerns, the growing inequality they face, and the seemingly indifferent policy responses from some parties within Australian politics.

Importantly though, while Gen Z's trust in government and politicians declines (Edelman, 2022) younger Australians identify schools and higher education institutions as being one of the most trustworthy and important drivers of change in addressing these inequities. There is, however, a pervasive sentiment that this potential has yet to be fully harnessed by those in positions of influence, including those of us in academia (Deloitte, 2021).

Representative of these tensions is the current debate surrounding a referendum in Australia to recognise Indigenous people within the constitution through the establishment of a Voice to Parliament: an enshrined advisory body to make representation to the government and parliament on matters impacting Indigenous people and communities. Current polls show significant levels of support amongst Gen Z and Millennial voters (Essential Research, 2023; Price, 2023; Torre, 2023), with more than 70% supporting this proposal alongside the 80% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also intending to vote for the proposed constitutional change (Crowe, 2023).

For many within our student cohorts (and beyond), a Voice to Parliament represents a major opportunity to ensure that legislation, government policies, and subsequent initiatives better address the educational inequities faced by Indigenous people. Therefore, it has been interesting to observe the tentative approach the higher education sector is taking towards this upcoming referendum. Australia's peak higher education advocacy body, headed by Australia's vice-chancellors, has declined to collectively and explicitly endorse support for constitutional change (Universities

Australia, 2023). Furthermore, while individual institutions are actively considering their own institutional positions, at the time of writing, only four have publicly endorsed a "Yes" position backed by their senior executive and governing councils. A further four have endorsed a "Yes" position by individual endorsements through their respective vice-chancellors. The remaining 31 institutions continue with either consultation or are silent on the matter. However, as Professor Megan Davis reminds us, any stance that a university may take, including staying silent, is inherently political. She argues:

> *Universities work on dispossessed land …. Being a robust university and facilitating both sides is not at odds with universities taking a position on the referendum on a voice to parliament …. It's important for young minds and the leaders of tomorrow and the First Nations collegiate to see what leadership looks like; what courage looks like. (Davis, 2023)*

While senior executive and governing boards are critical to this, leadership must also come from those of us at the student services interface. Such leadership, responsive to the structural barriers that impact educational outcomes for our diverse student cohorts, must move beyond deficit pastoral models of care and consider what excellence in student support looks like when we get political, when we recognise structural inequality, and when we centre marginalised and minoritised voices in everything that we do.

Such an approach requires that we commit to critical reflection, educate ourselves about the lives and experiences of others and, more than listen, *believe* their experiences. It is important to examine the impact of service provision on minoritised cohorts, understand their feedback, and track the impact our efforts have in terms of their educational experience and academic outcomes. It also requires advocacy within, and external to, our teams to centre equity and inclusion in all that we do. This includes making evidence-based arguments for committed budget to enable this important work—work that is too often conceptualised as peripheral to core business of a university. We must also proactively and collectively foster and sustain meaningful partnerships with communities and organisations that are doing the work internal and external to our universities and consider ways to amplify their efforts of change. Argue for a diversified workforce that better reflects the student body we serve and be prepared to get things wrong but learn from missteps. However, more than anything, taking the time to understand that higher education has the potential to transform lives and enrich society through the work of individuals and the collective. But to do so it takes leadership and courage, of the personal and political kind, to suitably address the inequities that shape the lives of the students we seek to serve, now and into the future. The next generation of university students will not only appreciate this work, but they will also rightfully come to expect it.

Acknowledgments

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Please cite this paper as: