

“Hole in the Pocket: Towards a racially inclusive academy.”

ABSTRACT

Exploring the concept of a racially inclusive academy begins with an examination of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are represented across our universities.

Sadly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to be underrepresented in Australia’s higher education sector, and currently represent approximately 1.3 percent of all higher education students at Australian universities.

While commencement, participation and completion rates have all increased over the past two decades, these figures have not kept pace with the increase in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, nor the increasing rates of participation by non-Indigenous students.

The small percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who access higher education translates into an even smaller number of students who complete their qualifications. Students who commence higher education, but fail to continue or complete their studies represent a hole in the pocket of higher education institutions. As a first step to building a racially-inclusive sector, attrition rates at universities must be addressed.

At the student level, this means acknowledging and addressing the forms of intellectual exclusion which exists in the academy. These forms of exclusion are institutional in nature and result from the existence of a dominant epistemology in teaching, assessment and research that serve to devalue Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander methodologies and ways of knowing.

At the staffing level, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are subject to another set of negative forces in the field of university employment. In the higher education workforce, these forces take the form of the supposedly ‘neutral’ employment processes which admit people to and promote them within the academy.

Only by addressing these institutional factors can the higher education sector close the hole in the pocket through which so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people slip, and finally make significant progress towards building a racially inclusive academy.