

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

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Good morning/afternoon. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of Fremantle, the Wadjuk people, and paying my respect to their elders past and present.

My name is Professor Steve Larkin, and I hold the position of Pro Vice-Chancellor – Indigenous Leadership at Charles Darwin University. In this position I work towards incorporating Indigenous perspectives into mainstream university core business, enhancing key relationships between the university and Indigenous stakeholders, and ensuring CDU is the sector leader in providing outcomes for Indigenous students.

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In addition to this role I also am here in my capacity as Chair of the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, or IHEAC. As you may be aware, IHEAC works with the Australian Government and stakeholders to enhance participation and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff in all aspects of higher education. The Council's vision is for a higher education system in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people share equally in the life and career opportunities that a quality higher education sector can provide.

The topic of my speech today is “Hole in the Pocket; Towards a Racially Inclusive Academy.” Given my role as the IHEAC chair and my position at CDU, my comments today will naturally address racial inclusiveness and the challenges faced by first year students from the perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. And while this topic is somewhat specific, I know that the themes and concepts I discuss will be applicable to racial groups from all minority or underrepresented backgrounds and relevant to everyone within the higher education sector.

In sharing my thoughts on this topic, I plan to look at the sector primarily from the perspective of students. I will begin by sharing some statistics on the current representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with a focus on

the attrition which occurs between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and completion numbers. I will then highlight some of the less tangible barriers which are contributing to this attrition and finish by examining some of the strategies which are being used to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to join and remain in our universities as valued, equal members.

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Any discussion of a racially inclusive academy must begin with an examination of how of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are represented as students.

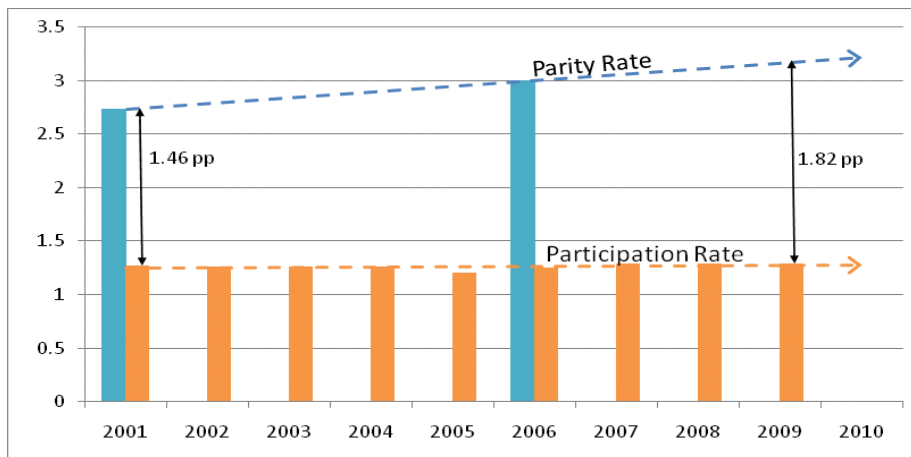
In 2009 there were over 10,400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education. These students studied at all levels: from Diplomas to PhDs. They specialised in a wide range of disciplines: law, medicine, business, education, and many more. Yet, despite the achievements of these students, and those of their predecessors right back to Charles Perkins, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to be underrepresented in Australia's higher education sector.

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. As a result, the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students across these measures has widened since 1990.

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As you will see in this graph, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education, as a proportion of the domestic student population, has remained relatively stable at about 1.3 or 1.4 per cent over the last 10 years. This is the series of orange columns. Meanwhile, within the wider Australian population aged 15-64 (the relevant age for university study), the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is actually growing quite quickly.

Drawn from ABS Census data, the blue trend line shows how many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students we would expect to see in higher education, if we were represented proportionally to our share of the population. As you can clearly see, the gap between the orange bars and the blue line is widening.



For those of you who are less persuaded by graphs, let me put this in concrete terms. If Aboriginal people were as equally represented within universities as within the wider Australian population, we would expect to see 31 Aboriginal students for every 1000 domestic non-Aboriginal students. Instead, in 2009 there were only 13. That means that 18 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who should (statistically speaking) be studying, are missing out on a university education. And this figure is relevant if we only aim to match the education levels amongst the general population, let alone exceed them! When you consider that there are over 800,000 domestic students enrolled in Australia, it means that there are over 14,500 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students who miss out. For a country that is supposedly ‘Closing the Gap’ and building a racially inclusive academy, this is a shameful result.

These overall figures are worrying in themselves. Unfortunately, they contain an additional challenge to building a racially inclusive sector – namely that 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. Data shows that the retention rate for first year Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is estimated at 67.6 per percent, compared to 79.2 percent for all other domestic students. This translates to losing one in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, compared to the one in five dropout rate that occurs for all domestic students. Similarly, overall completion rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are reported to be 22 per cent less than for non-Indigenous Australian students. Plainly, too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are falling through the ‘hole in the pocket’ of our higher education institutions and becoming lost to us.

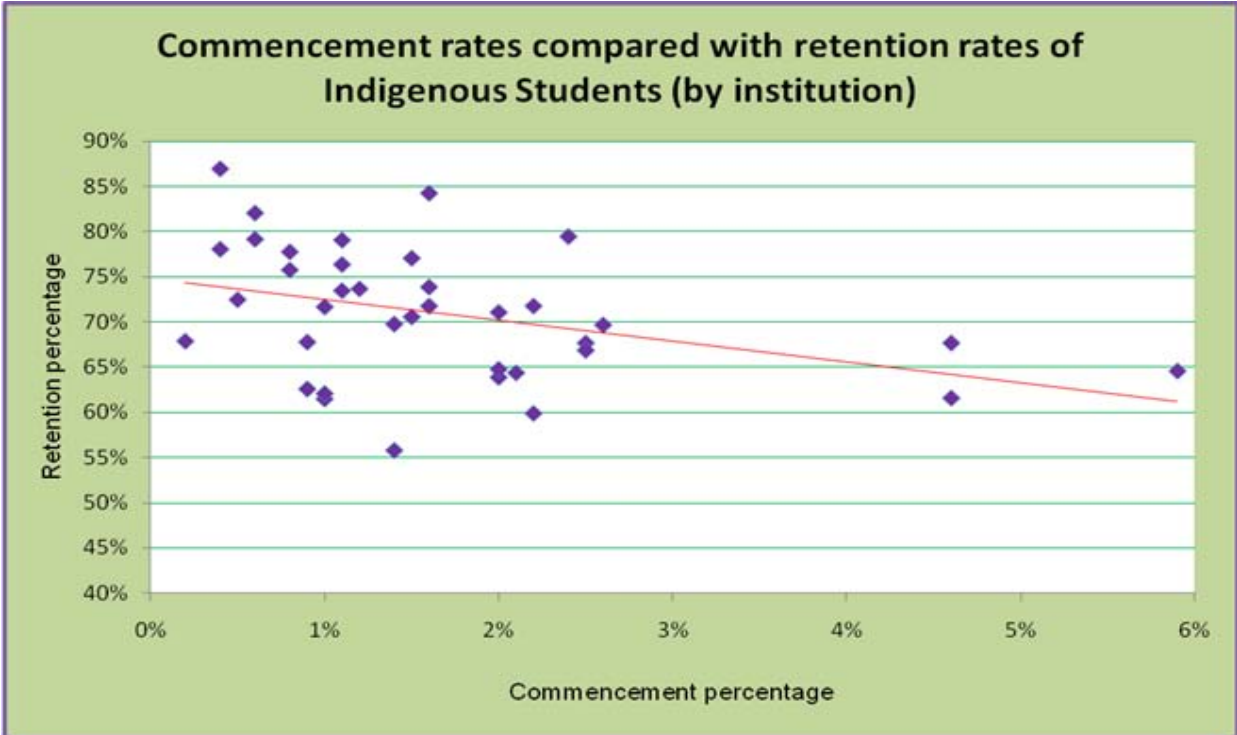
As a first step to building a racially-inclusive sector, attrition rates at universities must be addressed.

Unfortunately, it's not as simple as asking universities to try harder, or that some universities are just more experienced or committed to retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at levels which equal population parity.

Instead, it seems that universities which focus on getting high numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through the door have high access rates for these students, but low completion rates. Conversely, universities with lower numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander commencements have a better retention and completion rate, which suggests they are more adept at using their resources to support smaller numbers of students throughout their academic journey.

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This graph demonstrates the relationship between Indigenous commencement and retention percentages by institution. As the red line on the graph indicates, the lower an institution's Indigenous commencement rate, the more likely it is to have a higher retention rate for its Indigenous students. Conversely, a university with the highest Indigenous commencement rate of six percent can only boast a 65 percent completion rate for its Indigenous students. This indicates that 'getting the highest number students through the door' is not necessarily a good indication of successful engagement.



(It should be noted that the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education was excluded from the institution list because of its uniquely high level of Indigenous student enrolments compared to other universities.)

This phenomenon demonstrates that creating pathways to university is not a stand-alone function or an end in itself, but should be combined with a culturally appropriate and supportive learning environment.

Designing success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students means investigating both institutional and personal circumstances those students face in their everyday life. Importantly, universities must avoid making assumptions about students; the student body is not a homogenous entity and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are more likely to be challenged by the prospect of entering a new environment, financial obstacles, and distance. Culturally-different large institutions with higher levels of independent learning can be daunting places and, combined with less financial support and family alienation through distance, require greater levels of assistance.

Of course, there are also some standout examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who *are* succeeding against the odds. People like Rebecca Richards, who recently became the first Aboriginal person to receive the prestigious Australia-at-Large Rhodes scholarship. Ms Richards will pursue a Master of Philosophy in material anthropology and museum ethnography at Oxford University, and in the process will no doubt bring her own cultural understanding to the University's academic endeavours in this field. Another positive example is provided by Flinders University's Northern Territory Medical Program. This program – a collaboration with CDU – has this year accepted the largest ever intake of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical students to a single course, ten of whom will be based in the Territory and four in South Australia. To put this into perspective: only nine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students graduated in medicine in the whole of Australia in 2009!

While these stories are uplifting, they remain the exception. Underrepresentation is the entrenched norm.

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Sadly, the academy is no more inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as staff than as students. And while the focus of this speech is on the experience of first year students, a brief examination of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staffing numbers is important to understanding the challenges of building a racially inclusive sector from the first year upwards.

Currently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up less than one percent of the university workforce. Yet, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are 2.5 percent of the Australian population

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When we separate out Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic staff – i.e. those in a research, teaching, or joint research and teaching role – from non-academic, or ‘general’ staff, this picture presents an even greater challenge. Two-thirds of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education workforce are employed in general or non-academic roles. By contrast, across the entire higher education workforce, only about half of all staff work within non-academic roles.

As you can see, the pattern of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s employment within universities is skewed away from research and teaching positions.

So on the one hand, universities should be applauded for increasingly employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but on the other, we should be careful that these employment decisions are not driven by unexamined biases and assumptions about the kinds of work Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are capable of doing within universities.

Of course, in line with my earlier comment around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people bucking the trend and succeeding as students, our situation within the academic workforce is not all bad. CDU alone can boast an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staffing rate of 7.4 percent. 40 percent of this cohort is employed in academic positions, which is on par with the academic staffing rate for all CDU employees. James Cook University is also bucking the trend with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staffing rate of approximately 2.4 percent, which is over double the state average and more than two-and-a-half times the sector average. Moreover, 46 percent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff at James Cook are employed in academic positions, which is actually above the university’s academic staffing rate for all employees, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or otherwise.

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At CDU and JCU, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are rightly regarded as an institutional asset, for good reasons. These universities recognise that new ideas in the academy are developed by listening to new perspectives, by researchers asking new questions and by having a diversity of people participating in the creation of knowledge. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff bring a wealth of cultural knowledge and perspectives in addition to the academic and professional skills of our field of study. In research, Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander staff use both our professional and cultural understanding to produce new areas of knowledge. For universities at the cutting edge of research, we offer an unparalleled edge.

From the perspective of students, having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people visible within universities provides education role models, helping young people to lift their aspirations towards going to uni, doing well, and continuing their studies beyond the first year. Our presence can play a crucial role in creating a safe and inclusive academy for capable students who may not otherwise feel that ‘university is the place for them’.

So, given the benefits that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff bring to every university, why are there so few of us? And given the many social and economic benefits that flow from a higher education, why are there so few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people entering universities? Finally, why do a disproportionate amount of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students – having overcome that daunting first step of entering university – then slip through the hole in the pocket of the higher education sector and abandon their studies?

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The causes behind Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander underrepresentation are naturally complex. At the most basic level, universities will struggle to attract and retain large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the absence of a sufficient pool of university-ready students succeeding at the school level. This is not necessarily something which the higher education sector can control, particularly in light of the recently-reported lack of progress towards the COAG Closing the Gap education targets.

Taking a deeper look at the issue, discussions around education outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are also frequently couched in deficit terms looking at the individual students themselves, their families and communities. Time and time again we see the ‘usual suspects’ rolled out to explain low enrolments, retention and attainment rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: often locating the ‘problem’ at the family and community level and implying that our families and communities do not have the capacity to raise their children to seek a better education.

I do not intend to diminish the significant role of family and community in promoting educational aspirations for young people. But looking beyond these initial and very visible barriers, I encourage you to also consider the institutional and structural factors which can work to exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as university students, and ultimately discourage them from continuing their studies beyond the first year.

From the perspective of students, this hole in the pocket through which so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people slip is created by a form of intellectual exclusion. This exclusion is institutional in nature and is due to the existence of a dominant epistemology in teaching, assessment and research that serves to devalue Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander methodologies and ways of knowing. This dominant epistemology – that has been referred to by critical race theorists as the neo-liberal positivist epistemology – pervades all aspects of Australia’s higher education institutions: including pedagogical approaches, the structure and governance of institutions, staffing and research. Its continued dominance is due to its perceived objectivity and neutrality – but in operation, it is anything but objective and neutral.

In action, the dominant pedagogical approach, assessment paradigm and research methods converge to devalue Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and perpetuate the deficit approach to these students by universities and other higher education providers.

A number of critical race theorists have looked at this issue in relation to research methods and knowledge production in colonised countries in post-colonial times. For example, the work of Dr Renee Pualani Louis, Professor Cheng Feng Shih, Professor Margaret Hunter, and Professor David Theo Goldberg all shed light on how the colonial past influences our understanding of what ‘counts’ as academic research, and who can do it.

The way in which dominant epistemologies impact on research is reasonably well understood. Today I want to build upon this point and consider the effect that the dominant epistemology has on students through our teaching and assessment.

Once we acknowledge the existence of a dominant theory of knowledge based on core claims about the nature of knowledge – including *who* can know, *how* they know and what counts as evidence for claims or of intellect – we can begin to understand how this dominant theory of knowledge operates to devalue and marginalise other ‘ways of knowing’ and expressions of intelligence.

This has a powerful affect upon students. If the academy presumes that some forms of knowledge are superior, it becomes less likely to consider other forms of knowledge – particularly the knowledge that its students already own which was collected through personal experiences and participation within diverse cultural traditions – as valuable. The researcher, Professor H. Richard Milner considered this issue. He argued that it is imperative for educators to acknowledge and consider their own *and* their student’s racial and cultural backgrounds when teaching. Milner argues that colour-blind and culture-blind approaches – which are often pursued in the name of neutrality – can lead to an ignorance of

discriminatory institutional practices toward students of colour or of different cultural backgrounds.

In practice, being aware if cultural differences could be as simple as valuing the different perspectives that students bring to the academy. Every student, not just those who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, holds a set of unique personal perspectives on the world. The knowledge contained within those perspectives must be carefully valued and preserved by educators and their institutions. Students should not feel that, in order to gain a university education, they must renounce other more subtle forms of cultural knowledge. Instead the academy should be offering forms of knowledge that can coexist, if not complement each student's existing cultural knowledge.

Achieving this goal is the aim of all truly great teachers and universities. We work towards it by carefully examining our institutions and ourselves, by shining a light into the hole to uncover unconscious forms of discrimination and exclusion. By exposing our hidden assumptions we become better able to acknowledge our own assumptions about race and racism and work to balance them with more inclusive practices. To borrow the words of Professor H. Richard Milner, this is a process of 'naming one's own reality'.

Through these acts of personal reflection and critique, we become more sensitive to wider epistemological processes within institutions or the wider society which exclude others.

If we acknowledge, as a starting point, that universities as institutions are based on white non-neutral terms of reference, we can begin to see how institutional characteristics form a hole through which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to slip. From that starting point, we can enter into a dialogue on how an openness to alternative pedagogies and different ways of thinking and doing in higher education might better meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

A perspective that critically examines the institution, rather than the individuals within those institutions would also go a long way towards challenging the deficit approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education that has for too long provided the loudest explanations for poor student outcomes. With this shift in perspective, from pathological *people* to pathological *institutions*, our universities will also become places much more welcoming of different perspectives and experiences; they will become 'culturally-safe' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as well as the majority of people on this earth who are not heirs to wealth and power with its origins in colonial exploitation.

What I am proposing today is not a total rejection of Western theory, research or knowledge, but rather, the promotion and encouragement of Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander perspectives in the academy in order to recognise the value they can bring to enrich all areas of scholarship. If we acknowledge that innovation and creativity stem from embracing difference, then recognising equivalence between different forms of knowledge is critical to our collective futures.

Moving beyond the subject of creating and favouring one form of knowledge over another, 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 the academy and promote them once they are through the door.

Once again, while the focus of my comments is on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, a brief look at the negative processes which are felt by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees is helpful in exposing the causes of student attrition.

Some of you may be aware of the large body of feminist scholarship which has revealed how workplace practices and processes (which purport to be neutral) can actually exclude women from succeeding within a workplace. Measures of performance, such as regular performance reviews which affect an employee's pay and promotion appear neutral, but the conceptual yardsticks used within them are quite vulnerable to double standards and stereotyped views of gender.

Just as with gender discrimination these 'neutral' performance management processes can not only facilitate this sort of racial bias, they can actually mask these inequalities beneath a veneer of meritocracy. Professor Castilla's important study, published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 2008, provides a telling description of how these masking processes can occur. In the large service organisation he studied, he demonstrated that not only does bias affect the performance ratings given to employees of different races, it also affects the pay and promotion decisions of employees who receive the same rating but are of different races!

These industry studies clearly show that meritocratic HR processes can be systematically undermined by the unexamined prejudices of decision makers and their wider organisation. Rather than providing a perfect vehicle, as a sector the academy needs to carefully examine its own behaviour to check that its merit-based processes are not clouded by prejudice and discrimination.

You may have doubts about my use of research conducted in non-university workplaces and question whether these findings are applicable to the academic sector: after all universities are staffed by highly educated and critically engaged employees who care passionately about education and pushing the frontiers of knowledge. You could rightly point out that the whole concept of critical race

theory and reflexivity was developed by scholars within our institutions, so it does indeed seem odd that I should now suggest that we (as a collection of institutions) are not practicing what we publish.

At the same time as this inspiring scholarship occurs, however, our academies are far from racially inclusive. For students who do not fit the mould, our institutions can appear unfriendly and exclusive. They are spaces in which one cultural form of knowledge is enshrined as normal and natural. Last year, Professor Gusa published an excellent article in the *Harvard Educational Review* describing exactly this process on campus. In this paper she describes how the dominant culture can easily come to see itself as entitled to this pre-eminence based upon its own worth. When others challenge this sense of natural ascendancy, people within the dominant culture can react to affirm their own power, creating a ‘chilly climate’ for others beyond the privileged group. This is particularly powerful within education institutions, because here people within this ascendant group are literally judging the quality of the work done by students and colleagues, some of whom – if they can brave the cold – make it to our hallowed citadels to study and work. In essence, Professor Gusa is describing the central ideas within ‘Whiteness studies’, however her analysis of how this plays out on campus is powerful and surprisingly accessible.

Going beyond the effect of race on students, there is no reason to suspect that employment decisions within the university would be exempt from the powerful effect of unexamined racial prejudice upon decision-making. Sadly, the process of becoming an academic, and earning your stripes within the university does not endow you with any innate power to see through cultural assumptions.

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I hope this discussion has been helpful in highlighting the factors which can make our sector such an unwelcoming place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff. I appreciate it’s a complex subject matter, rich with academic terms. If you’d like to learn more about the topics or authors I mentioned, I will put up a slide recommending a few publications at the end of this presentation. In the meanwhile, I’ll re-emphasise my key point – that dominant epistemologies, pedagogical approaches, and ways of knowing combine with subjective merit systems to create a hole through which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to fall, and become lost to the sector.

In many ways, the factors which create this hole are more insidious than explicit instances of discrimination and racism, which unfortunately continue to occur in our universities. Since I’ve been Chair of IHEAC I have been privy to a number of concerning stories. These have ranged from non-Indigenous students showing little or no respect to senior Indigenous academics at their university; non-Indigenous

staff speaking in a patronising way toward their Indigenous colleagues; and racist comments and attitudes directed toward Indigenous students and staff. These are all inexcusable examples of racism, and yet they are highly visible and thus easier to directly address. How can we close the hole which threatens to swallow a first year Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student, but which is entirely undetectable and poses no hazard to somebody from an Anglo-Western background?

Through my role as Pro-Vice Chancellor and as Chair of IHEAC, I have a number of strategies I'd like to share.

One of our most powerful tools is self reflection. Admittedly this can be difficult thing to do, especially as we are asking universities to imagine their behaviour and processes from the perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Thankfully, we have an instrument that helps us in this activity, and encourages universities to become more racially inclusive: the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

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IHEAC in particular draws upon this document to advocate for an inclusive, equitable higher education sector. For those of you not familiar with it, the Declaration is an inspirational document that aims to safeguard, under international law, the rights of the world's estimated 370 million Indigenous peoples. It was endorsed by the Australian Government in April 2009, approximately two years after it was adopted by the UN General Assembly.

One of the overarching themes of the Declaration is the importance of resetting the relationship between Indigenous peoples, the broader community and government. The Declaration provides guidance on how we can create an Australia where the rights and cultural differences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are valued, protected and seen as a positive part of Australian culture and society. And while the Declaration is not binding under Australian law, IHEAC is nonetheless committed to promoting it as a reference point for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, freedom from discrimination and cultural and development rights.

You may wonder how the UN Declaration is relevant to retaining first year Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and building a racially inclusive academy. To answer this, consider the following articles of the document, in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education:

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Article 14 of the Declaration outlines the rights of Indigenous peoples to establish and control our own education systems and institutions; to access culturally

appropriate education in our own languages; and to access all levels of education without discrimination.

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Article 15 articulates the right of Indigenous peoples to the dignity and diversity of our cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations and for these to be appropriately reflected in education and public information.

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And, Article 21 outlines the rights of Indigenous peoples to improve our economic and social conditions without discrimination in a number of areas including education.

How do the aspirations of these articles compare to our actual progress in creating a racially-inclusive academy? Can we honestly say that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are currently empowered to establish and control education systems and institutions in our own languages and in accordance with our cultural methods of teaching and learning? That our cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations are reflected in Australia's education landscape? That Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people currently access all levels and forms of education in a way that is free from discrimination? Or finally that we as a First Nations group are truly empowered to improve our economic and social conditions in areas that include education?

The Declaration encourages the education system to incorporate our language, our history, our culture and our traditions for a very good reason. By calling attention to these issues, it reminds us that there are systemic and institutional factors that can act to exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from undertaking, or remaining in higher education.

In terms of practical steps to realising the goals of the UN Declaration and building a racially inclusive academy, there are a range of initiatives currently underway:

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At Charles Darwin University an exciting new initiative is underway. The soon to be built Australian Centre of Indigenous Knowledge and Education (ACIKE) will commence full operations in 2012. The ACIKE is underpinned by the formal partnership between CDU and the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and was made possible through a successful Commonwealth Government Education Investment Fund grant in 2009. The ACIKE will be an iconic state of the art facility that will utilise high level technologies and agility of space. It will deliver high quality higher education and research programs through

a range of flexible delivery arrangements at various delivery points across the NT. Indigenous leadership of the centre will be a hallmark feature. The funding also provides for the construction of a 30 bed student accommodation facility and a number of Mobile Adult Learning Units or vehicles to enable course delivery in remote locations. The initiative in itself will represent a significant step for CDU to lift the fog by privileging Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies and research methodologies within the activities and core business of the Centre.

Also at CDU another new program has been introduced in 2011 and its critical importance should not be overlooked. The newly accredited Mawul Rom Master's degree program represents the first time that Indigenous ceremonial law – specifically the Yolgnu law of peacemaking - has been acknowledged as part of a qualification in the Australian academy. The qualification recognises the knowledge and skills gained from the knowledge traditions of two cultures, exploring and encouraging participation in learning about contemporary peacemaking, mediation and negotiation in cross cultural contexts. The course is a symbol of two knowledge traditions working side by side through mutual respect and contributes to the defogging of the academy and the institution by according equivalent status to both knowledge systems.

My Pro Vice-Chancellor position in and of itself is a critically important development within the academy. In establishing the position in 2008 and with my appointment in 2009, CDU became the first Australian university to establish a pro-Vice-Chancellorship dedicated to Indigenous issues and I became the first ever Indigenous person to be appointed at that level in an Australian University. Now this is not about me per se at all. At some point in the future I will have moved on but the legacy will remain. Another person will step in to my shoes and continue the work to make a positive difference. My point in terms of the theme in this paper is that while it took until 2008 to occur, already a number of other universities have established identical positions.

This augurs well for the future in terms of universities enrolling, and then successfully retaining, larger numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

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The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council is also helping to build a racially inclusive academy through a number of projects and strategies. The Council recently partnered with Universities Australia to support pilot projects to embed Indigenous cultural competency in curriculum design and delivery in four Australian Universities. This initiative sought to provide universities with the tools to embed cultural competency at the institutional level to provide encouraging and supportive environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

students and staff. As a result they would produce well-rounded graduates with the ability to provide genuinely competent services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This includes the recognition and respect of the cultural knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

While these projects were just pilots, IHEAC and Universities Australia are also building upon their success to develop, with the help of a consultant, a National Best Practice Framework that can be used to integrate Indigenous cultural competency across the higher education sector. The Framework is currently being finalised and will be made available to the sector as a physical document and web-based resource in the coming months.

We hope that this project will support the challenging epistemological self-examination I discussed earlier. It will gather together new approaches and ideas, helping us all to develop research and teaching methods which prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from dropping through the hole in the sector's pocket.

But I must make the point that it is not just about having commendable commitments. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems are not in themselves tangible entities that can be accessed, appropriated and deployed by staff in teaching and learning activities. This presumes that such knowledges are or can be detached at will from their holders and that they can be understood and taught by anyone.

While universities are becoming increasingly willing to embed other knowledge systems into course content, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staffing numbers, particularly in the academic sphere, remain very low. We are in danger of sending the message that Indigenous knowledges are important, but not the people who hold them. To avoid this we must ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are involved in the development and teaching of courses and units so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their perspectives inform both pedagogies and knowledge formation.

To do this, the IHEAC has developed a cohesive National Indigenous Higher Education Workforce Strategy to identify and develop the Indigenous higher education workforce.

Without going into the detail, the strategy has four core policy objectives:

1. To enhance employment pathways for existing Indigenous employees,
2. To increase new employment opportunities for Indigenous people

3. To develop a working environment appropriate to the needs of Indigenous people; and
4. To improve universities' community engagement and outreach with the Indigenous community.

In essence, the Strategy will help to make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment, particularly academic employment within universities, part of the business planning of each faculty. The National Indigenous Higher Education Strategy was recently launched at the 19th IHEAC meeting in Canberra on 27 June 2011, and I look forward to implementing and promoting its content in the months ahead .

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In conclusion, my goal today was to share with you some of the hidden processes which pocket the supposedly neutral space of higher education that affect first year students and discourage ongoing participation by those from non-Western backgrounds. For us to achieve a racially inclusive academy, something must be done about the low numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people engaging with universities as students and staff. We know there are a range of factors which need to be overcome – factors we can't necessarily control like health, and housing, and school-age achievement. But what we can do is examine our own institutions and close the holes through which so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people slip.

We have the tools to conduct this self-examination; through the work of CDU , and various IHEAC initiatives, and the guiding principles of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous people.

And we know that change is possible.

To close on a non-academic note, take a look at the AFL today. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are overrepresented in the competition. We need to remind ourselves that this wasn't always the case. Change occurred because people like Kevin Sheedy led the way in recruiting and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through innovative strategies, and by recognising the strengths and talents that our people brought to his sector. Too often Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander success in sport is dismissed as irrelevant to wider academic or workforce participation. It shouldn't be. The professions might be different, but the processes and principles used by the AFL are entirely transferable to universities.

Consider the case of Liam Jurrah, a Walpiri man from Yuendumu now playing for Melbourne in the AFL. For those of you not familiar with Aussie Rules, in 2009

Liam became the first initiated lore man to play football at the highest level, and is now one of the most electrifying players in the competition.

What few people know is that Liam began his career at Collingwood, in the state-level competition. Sadly, Liam was unable to continue with Collingwood because the club couldn't accommodate his cultural obligations. Liam fell through the hole in Collingwood's pocket, and the Magpies lost a very valuable resource. Two years later a rival club not only drafted him, but – most importantly – they retained him, to the great benefit of both the club and to Liam Jurrah.

Our universities need a similar commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as students. We need to recognise the asset that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people bring to academia, and reform our sector so that this valuable resource no longer falls through the hole in our pocket.

By doing this, I am confident we can create a welcoming environment for first year students and truly achieve a racially inclusive academy.

Thank you.

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