A model of senior Indigenous leadership in Australian higher education: An Indigenous academic perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – Senior Indigenous leadership positions across the Australian higher education sector has increased over the past decade. Despite this advancement, there is limited understanding in terms of how to best integrate Indigenous leadership into existing governance structures of Australian universities. In 2018 the *Walan Mayiny: Indigenous Leadership in Higher Education* project commenced, aimed at establishing a model of best practice for the inclusivity of Indigenous leadership in higher education governance structures. This article presents key findings from the project, namely, a model of senior Indigenous leadership within the Australian universities based on the perceptions of a group of Indigenous academics.

Design/methodology/approach – Through qualitative semi-structured interviews with Indigenous academic staff, the perceived value, characteristics and challenges of senior Indigenous leadership were examined. The varying opinions held by Indigenous academics in relation to the qualifications and experience required to fulfil a senior Indigenous leadership position were also highlighted. In doing so, a model of senior Indigenous leadership within the Australian higher education system is presented. The model of best practice presented in this article is underpinned by Indigenous Institutional Theory (Coates et al., 2022), a theoretical framework developed from the Walan Mayiny study.

Findings – The research findings highlight the diverse opinions of Indigenous academics in relation to the qualifications and experience required to fulfil a senior Indigenous leadership position. The six essential components are built upon the core characteristics, values and behaviours that senior Indigenous leaders need to have according to Indigenous academics, in order to advance Indigenous success within the academy.

Originality/value – Given Australian universities are being called upon to ensure that senior Indigenous leaders are in the best position possible to forge institutional change, senior Indigenous leaders within the academy may find the contextual Indigenous leadership model beneficial. The model allows one to uphold cultural integrity and fulfil the responsibilities and obligations of their higher education institution, while being able to serve their Indigenous colleagues and communities, leading to the advancement of Indigenous higher education outcomes. Importantly, the model can be adapted to suit all First Nations Peoples globally, who also find themselves working within the shackles of Western institutions.

Keywords Indigenous leadership, Leadership competencies, Leadership education, Indigenous higher education

Paper type Research paper

The number of senior Indigenous leadership positions across the Australian higher education sector has steadily increased over the past decade. Despite this advancement, there is limited understanding in terms of how to best integrate Indigenous leadership into the existing governance structures of Australian higher education institutions. In 2018 the *Walan Mayiny: Indigenous Leadership in Higher Education* project commenced, aimed at establishing a model of best practice for the inclusivity of Indigenous leadership in higher education governance structures. This article presents some of the findings from the project, namely, a model of senior Indigenous leadership within the Australian higher education system based on the perceptions of a group of Indigenous academics. Importantly, the model is comprised of six essential components of Indigenous leadership that were identified through the voices of Indigenous academics from across the nation.

Introduction

Leadership is a concept that has arguably existed since people were required to work collaboratively to achieve a mutual objective (Doyle, Hungerford, Pitt, Saunders, & Wilkey, 2020; Gottfredson & Reina, 2020). However, despite the vast amount of research spanning over centuries, no single theory has been able to capture the essence of leadership and/or leadership dynamics (Billsberry, 2013). Therefore, "leadership" is a disputed term (Doyle *et al.*, 2020; Sun & Anderson, 2012); as such, leadership research is dominated by multiple models (Stewart & Warn, 2016) across both Western and Indigenous frameworks.

In terms of Western models of leadership, while there is no singular accepted model of leadership (Billsberry, 2013), Western leadership models commonly include the following three key principles: leading the organisation; leading people within the organisation; and leading oneself (Hagemann, 2022; Northouse, 2010). With regards to leading the organisation, this involves ensuring appropriate structures and systems are in place to maintain global productive systems of work. Leading people within the organisation focuses on building individual and team capability, and leading oneself involves understanding one's own role and the role of others, while managing strategic internal and external relationships (Dinh, Lord, Gardner, Meuser, Liden, & Hu, 2014).

When examining prominent concepts that inform leadership theories, it is clear that whilst leadership theorists offer different styles and models, most concur that all leaders must demonstrate a set of characteristics, values and behaviours (Doyle *et al.*, 2020). Examination of the characteristics, values and behaviours encapsulated within Western models of leadership reveals that they typically include leading by example while being cooperative and optimistic (Gächter, Nosenzo, Renner, & Sefton, 2012), building and maintaining relationships; inspiring a shared vision; not being afraid to challenge the status quo (Kouzes & Posner, 2011); having emotional intelligence, integrity and trustworthiness (Goleman, Welch, & Welch, 2012); possessing the capacity to actively contribute (Buchele, 2011); and being altruistic and authentic (Ciulla, 2013). While the sets of characteristics listed here arguably typify the most successful leaders (Doyle *et al.*, 2020), Western leadership theories often describe the empowerment of the individual, rather than the collective (Ly, 2020).

Turning our attention to Indigenous leadership, it needs to be acknowledged that Indigenous leadership can be viewed in two very distinct frames. Firstly, Indigenous leadership can be conceived as a separate consideration, *outside* Western institutions. In this sense, "traditionally" speaking, Indigenous leadership is conferred conditionally and is to be constantly earned (Minthorn & Chavez, 2015). By its very nature, Indigenous leadership is a "process rather than simply an ascribed position within a hierarchy" (Morphy, 2007, p. 98). Fundamentally, Indigenous leaders continually demonstrate highly developed physical strength, spirituality, as well as cultural and intellectual knowledge (Aguilera-Black Bear & Tippeconnic, 2015). Importantly, while senior Indigenous Peoples are typically respected and

held in high esteem, Indigenous leadership is a collective responsibility that overshadows individualism (Evans & Ryan, 2019; Voyageur, Brearley, & Calliou, 2015). Thus, it is the responsibility of the Indigenous leader to create and maintain consensus within their tribe, while demonstrating a lifelong commitment to their people and their culture (Calliou, 2008; Minthorn & Chavez, 2015).

However, and fundamental to this article, Indigenous leadership is also framed as both the practice and work of Indigenous Peoples in leadership positions *within* Western institutions. When framed this way, research suggests Indigenous leadership models contain all the characteristics, values and behaviours typical of Western models (Trudgett, Page, & Coates, 2021; Wuttunee, Loustel, & Overall, 2007), yet they differ in their balance between individualism and collectivism (Ly, 2020). Like "traditional" Indigenous leadership principles, collectivism is also considered a fundamental element of Indigenous leadership irrespective of which community one represents (Voyageur *et al.*, 2015). In addition to adopting a more collective approach, Indigenous leadership models are governed by a set of guiding principles that encompass cultural identity (Carroll & Levy, 2010; Evans & Sinclair, 2016; Housman, 2015), a lifelong commitment to the wider Indigenous community (Calliou, 2008; Minthorn & Chavez, 2015) and recognition of spiritual values and cultural traditions (Borofsky, 2010; Spiller, Maunganui Wolfgramm, Henry, & Pouwhare, 2019) similar to "traditional" Indigenous leadership frameworks. However, an additional feature of post-colonial models of Indigenous leadership typically includes advocacy and the prioritisation of self-determination (Aguilera-Black Bear & Tippeconnic, 2015; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

In an earlier paper from this study we argued that Indigenous leadership builds on the concept of leadership, thus including the usual aspects of leadership, but also advances these concepts to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing, being, doing and connecting (Coates, Trudgett, & Page, 2022). Importantly,

> Indigenous Leadership is heavily connected to our responsibilities and commitment to the Indigenous communities, with a strong focus on Indigenous sovereignty. Indigenous cultures inform our practices and draw on our lived experiences to provide a unique form of leadership excellence. Characteristics of Indigenous leadership include (but are not limited to) resilience, advocacy and activism, courage and commitment. An additional of Indigenous Leadership is the fact that it often has a future focus as well as a past focus. It extends beyond the sheer benefits to a particular organisation or group in the immediate time. As such, Indigenous Leaders actualise a vision to create opportunities for future generations (Coates *et al.*, 2022, p. 914).

This definition that will underpin the findings presented in this paper. It is hoped the definition can be utilised as a vehicle to elevate and promote the significant value and importance of Indigenous leadership, not only in higher education, but throughout all Western institutions.

Indigenous Leadership in Australian Higher Education

A number of Australian Government-initiated reviews including the *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989, 1994), the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley *et al.*, 2008) and the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt *et al.*, 2012) have investigated the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in higher education. Recommendations for achieving parity of participation and outcomes were echoed across these reviews (see Coates, Trudgett, & Page, 2020). Pleasingly, during recent decades the number of Indigenous Australians participating in higher education across Australian universities has steadily increased (Page, Trudgett, & Sullivan, 2017). However, despite the visible increase of

Indigenous participation rates in higher education, significant gaps remain between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians completing higher education qualifications (Nakata, 2013; Page *et al.*, 2017; Wilson & Wilks, 2015). Notably, while Page *et al.* (2017) made some positive predictions concerning the potential state of play in 2040, based on current data and historical trends, they cautioned that for these predictions to come to fruition there must be a stronger commitment and investment from Australian universities.

Parallel with the predictions made by Page *et al.* (2017), the inaugural *Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2017–2020* (Universities Australia, 2017) was developed in collaboration with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium (NATSIHEC). The strategy prescribed several initiatives and outlined common goals to bring together universities across the country. While the strategy listed multiple objectives, its main objective was clearly articulated as seeking to increase the number of Indigenous Australians participating in higher education, not only as students and graduates, but also as academic and research staff, with a strong focus on Indigenous leadership (Universities Australia, 2017). This is important because the purpose of Indigenous leadership in higher education is to advocate for Indigenous staff, students and the wider Indigenous community (Coates, Trudgett, & Page, 2021). It is evident that senior Indigenous leaders play a crucial role in transforming policy and practice in terms Indigenous education, while holding institutions accountable with regards to the inclusion of Indigenous matters. Such actions by our Indigenous leaders are significant because it contributes to building socially and culturally engaged institutions (Gale, 2011). The benefits of increasing the institution's ability to operate in a manner that is meaningful are two-fold; the benefit that Indigenous Knowledge can have on informing all aspects of learning, teaching and research (Pewewardy, 2015); and the benefits it can bring to the Indigenous community through increased student engagement (Gale, 2011).

It is evident that the number of Indigenous Australians holding positions of Dean, Pro Vice-Chancellor (PVC) and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) has increased since the first *Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2017–2020* was released in 2017 (Universities Australia, 2017). However, despite increased numbers of Indigenous Australians holding senior leadership positions across the sector, the implementation of these roles remains largely ad hoc (Trudgett *et al.*, 2021). While there is a growing literature investigating the concepts of Indigenous leadership and governance within Indigenous communities, as well as a range of business and political settings (e.g. Ivory, 2005; Smith & Hunt, 2008; White, 2010), research on Indigenous leadership within Australian universities is much more limited. This article offers a way forward when working towards better integrating Indigenous leadership into the overall architecture of institutional leadership structures.

Developing an Indigenous leadership model

Drawing on epistemology from Indigenist research not only distils leadership theories from both non-Indigenous and Indigenous scholars (Rigney, 2001; Rigney, 2006), but results in a model that is built upon core values and core activities of Indigenous leadership (Calliou & Voyageur, 2007). However, there is a gap in knowledge when deliberating upon Indigenous leadership models (Aguilera-Black Bear & Tippeconnic, 2015). Doyle *et al.* (2020) suggest the gap in knowledge explains why many Indigenist theorists have drawn upon their own experience, together with community mores and opinions, to develop their own contextualised models that advance the success of Indigenous Peoples around the globe. For example, Wiapo and Clark (2022) developed a theoretical framework for Māori nurses in leadership positions that drew upon the leadership experiences of Māori nurses. Whilst White (2009) completed doctoral research that examined university-educated Indigenous

Australian women's journeys to leadership. On the other hand, Fredericks (2009) shared her experiences and in doing so exemplified her epistemology of Indigenous Peoples' leadership participation in Australian universities. Each of these Indigenist theorists created an adapted Indigenous leadership style best suited to their contextual and situational requirements.

Central to this article, the literature pertaining to Indigenous leadership in Australian higher education predominately focuses on Indigenous women's leadership across the sector (Fredericks, White, Bunda, & Baker, 2011; Hogarth & Bunda, 2018; Mooney, Riley, & Blacklock, 2018; Wyld, 2010). An example of this is the important contribution made by Fredericks and White (2018), which provides a narrative surrounding the history of Indigenous women's employment and engagement within Australian universities. While Fredericks and White (2018) acknowledged the achievements of Indigenous women within the academy, they argue that there are many more challenges that overshadow these few gains. One major challenge identified by Fredericks and White (2018) is the difficulty for Indigenous women to progress their academic careers because they lacked support within the institution. Identifying this challenge led Fredericks and White (2018) to call out the "black glass ceiling", raising the question of how it can be broken. They went on to critically examine structural impediments to Indigenous women's employment and promotability; in doing so, they identified inherent weaknesses in the siloes and stratified attitudes of the academy. As a result, Fredericks and White (2018) argued that to build the Indigenous workforce across the sector – as outlined in university Indigenous employment strategies and government-initiated reviews – Australian universities need to shift from a dominant discriminatory workplace culture and move towards making the academy a culturally safe place for Indigenous staff members.

While the contribution made by Fredericks and White (2018) in identifying weaknesses in the academy is considered significant, their research resulted in several questions that remain unanswered including *what is the role and consequent impact of senior Indigenous leaders within the academy?* They also posed the question *what are the essential components of senior Indigenous leadership?* This identified gap in the literature provides the perfect opportunity to further examine the role and value of senior Indigenous leaders within the academy.

Understanding the role and consequent impact of senior Indigenous leaders within the academy is crucial as it can assist with ensuring Indigenous leadership is effectively integrated into the governance structures of Australian universities in a more meaningful manner. This will enable senior Indigenous leaders an opportunity to have increased institutional authority to drive widespread Indigenous outcomes. Furthermore, the findings of this study will provide a platform for universities and government bodies to take immediate action with respect to removing barriers that underpin these positions, thus ensuring every chance of success is made available.

Walan Mayiny: Indigenous leadership in higher education
Funded by the Australian Research Council, the *Walan Mayiny: Indigenous Leadership in Higher Education* project commenced in 2018, with the intention of establishing a model of best practice for the inclusivity of Indigenous leadership in higher education governance structures (Coates *et al.*, 2020). Establishing a rigorous framework is significant as it will assist with breaking down the systemic barriers to Indigenous higher education and promote educational sovereignty for Indigenous Peoples (Coates *et al.*, 2020).

Methodology
The project design included two phases (Figure 1). Taking a qualitative approach, Phase 1 employed five stages of interviews with a range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people involved with Indigenous higher education. Stage 1 involved interviewing recruitment
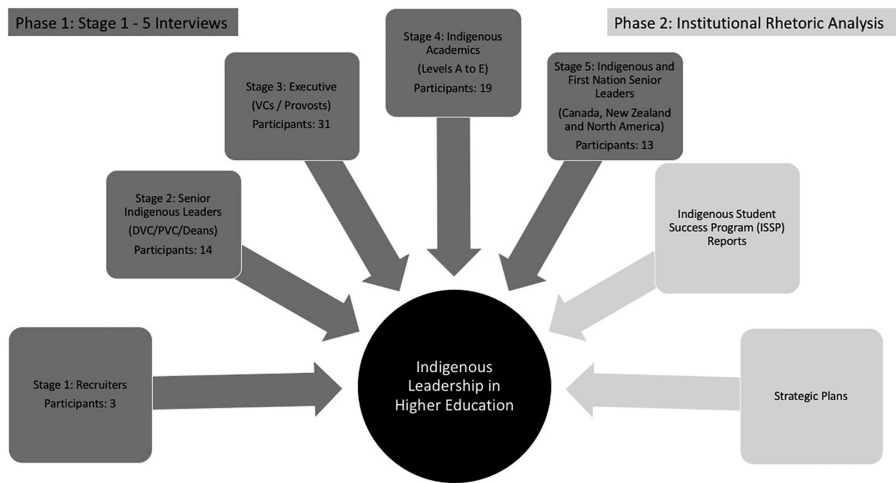
Figure 1.
Indigenous leadership
in higher education
project design

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officers who had assisted universities with recruiting senior Indigenous leaders at the level of Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC), Pro Vice-Chancellor (PVC), or Dean. Stage 2 sought the views of Indigenous Australians holding Indigenous-specific senior positions at levels such as DVC, PVC and Dean, to learn more about their role, responsibilities and experiences. The third stage of the project involved non-Indigenous university senior executives including Vice-Chancellors (VCs), Provosts, DVCs and other delegated senior executives identified by their VC. Stage 4 encompassed Indigenous academics ranging from associate lecturer (i.e. Level A) to the more senior academic position of professor (i.e. Level E) and forms the basis of this PhD. Stage 5 included the views of First Nation leaders from Canada, New Zealand and North America. Phase 2 of the project took a quantitative approach and examined Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP) reports and strategic plans from universities across Australia, as well as other relevant data. The study reported here is focuses solely on data collected in one component of a larger research project.

The wider *Walan Mayiny* project is underpinned by Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Foley, 2003; Nakata, 1998) and elements of Institutional Theory (Cai & Mehari, 2015). However, the model of best practice presented in this article is underpinned by Indigenous Institutional Theory (Coates *et al.*, 2022; Coates, Trudgett, & Page, 2022) theoretical framework developed from the *Walan Mayiny* study.

Indigenous Institutional Theory offers a powerful explanatory lens that allows policies of Western institutions and prejudiced political agendas to be examined (Coates *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, it provides the opportunity to investigate the manner in which discriminatory structures are created, reinforced and culturally challenged. In doing so, the framework provides the platform to bring into focus the community-driven actions and societal positioning of Indigenous leaders (Coates *et al.*, 2022).

Walan Mayiny: Indigenous academic perceptions of senior Indigenous leadership in higher education
The project design included two phases as depicted in Figure 1. This paper brings together the findings relating to Phase 1, Stage 4 of the project which centres the voices of 19

Indigenous academics from across the nation, ranging from Associate Lectures (Level A) through to more senior Indigenous academics holding positions of Professor (Level E). Other participant groups included recruiters, Senior Indigenous leaders, University Executive (predominantly Vice-Chancellors) and First Nation Leaders in Canada, New Zealand and North America. The model presented in this paper is solely based on the data provided by the Indigenous academic cohort, as this was segmented off to form the lead author's Doctor of Philosophy dissertation.

The 19 participants were asked a series of questions pertaining to their views and opinions surrounding the strengths, challenges and impacts of senior Indigenous leadership positions within their own university and across the sector. Interviews were either conducted face-to-face, via videoconference or telephone. Interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service and provided to the participant for review and approval. The qualitative software package NVivo11 was utilised to analysis the data. A combined technique of "deductive and inductive analysis" was applied (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Notably, all three authors analysed and coded the data collectively to ensure no biases were applied (Bazeley, 2013; Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

Model of senior Indigenous leadership in Australian higher education: from the perspectives of Indigenous academics

Like the Indigenous leadership models, theories and epistemologies offered by Māori theorists such as Wiapo and Clark (2022), as well as Indigenous theorists White (2009) and Fredericks (2009), the model of best practice was created through robust data collection and analysis (see Coates *et al.*, 2020) to suit the contextual and situational requirements of the leader, the community and the academy. This involved identifying the perceived values, characteristics and challenges of senior Indigenous leaders within the academy (see Coates *et al.*, 2021). The research also explored and reported on the various levels of engagement between Indigenous academics and their senior Indigenous leader, along with the perceptions of Indigenous academics regarding their own career progression and the role played by senior Indigenous leaders in ensuring there are opportunities for career progression (see Coates *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, the research findings highlight the diverse opinions of Indigenous academics in relation to the qualifications and experience required to fulfil a senior Indigenous leadership position (Coates *et al.*, 2020).

The findings reported in previous publications are now brought together and used to offer an Indigenous leadership model. Encapsulating the essential components of senior Indigenous leadership within the academy, from the perspectives of Indigenous academics, the model is comprised of six essential components, as depicted in Figure 2.

The six essential components are built upon the core characteristics, values and behaviours that senior Indigenous leaders need to have according to Indigenous academics, in order to advance Indigenous success within the academy. Each of the six components is examined in further detail in the following sections.

Formal academic qualifications and higher education experience

> You need somebody that knows the sector to be placed in those positions . . . and has completed post-graduate studies, research, a PhD, that way they understand the needs of students and their colleagues as well as knowing how to navigate their way through the institution. (Indigenous Academic)

Opinions held by Indigenous academics revealed two conflicting viewpoints on the essential qualifications and experience senior Indigenous leaders should hold. More than half of the participants believed senior Indigenous leaders should have a proven track record in research, including having obtained a doctoral qualification. This group of Indigenous academics also felt it was equally important for senior Indigenous leaders to have had

Source(s): Figure by authors

previous experience working within the higher education setting. The Indigenous academics that voiced this belief went on to explain that "experienced" leaders had a better understanding of what it takes to support undergraduate and postgraduate students and early career researchers. Such leaders were considered better equipped with being able to put appropriate support structures in place, in terms of student facilities, Indigenous-led programs and mentoring of junior academic staff Berman and Pitman (2010) examined the extent to which Australian universities value and capitalise on doctoral graduates that are later employed as staff in higher education. Significantly, the findings presented by Berman and Pitman (2010) echo the views and opinions held by more than half of the Indigenous academics that participated in the *Walan Mayiny* study: that is, senior executives should have a proven track record in research and previous experience working within a higher education setting. According to Berman and Pitman (2010), the benefits of such experience are twofold. First, they believe staff that have completed a research-based doctoral qualification are more likely to have a deeper understanding of how a university operates in terms of research-related activities, and therefore understand the effect such activities have on management practices. In terms of management practices, this includes, but is not limited to, producing high-quality education and research, strengthening research partnerships with industry, and providing appropriate academic support to higher degree by research students and early career academics. Second, and consistent with similar research (McInnis, 1998; Dobson &

Conway, 2003; Collinson, 2006, 2007), Berman and Pitman (2010) found that staff with research experience (at the doctoral level) utilise evidence-based research skills and apply appropriate research methodologies when preparing critical policy documents, and when initiating and facilitating solutions to complex issues. Berman and Pitman (2010) further concluded that staff working within higher education who had neither previously worked within the university system nor undertaken a research-based doctorate lacked an understanding of the key components of academic activity that are crucial to the success of universities and are equally not equipped with the essential critical thinking skills to successfully overcome problems. Therefore, "untrained/inexperienced" staff were deemed ineffective in such roles (Berman & Pitman, 2010).

As such, findings from recent research (e.g. Berman & Pitman, 2010; McInnis, 1998; Dobson & Conway, 2003; Collinson, 2006, 2007), align with those arising from the *Walan Mayiny* study: notably half of the Indigenous academics who participated in the study believed formal qualifications and higher education experience were essential attributes of senior Indigenous leadership. Thus, to have credibility with Indigenous academic staff, and to be effective leaders within the university, Indigenous academics believe that senior Indigenous leaders in Australian universities need to have a combination of both formal tertiary qualifications and experience working within higher education settings.

Relationship with Indigenous communities

> I think Indigenous leadership in universities is an extension of Indigenous leadership that's been happening for 60,000 years. Any Indigenous leader within the university also needs to be a leader out in our communities, have relationships with our families and in their field as well. (Indigenous Academic)

Another key theme that emerged from the research was the belief that senior Indigenous leaders must have meaningful connections with the Indigenous community - both locally, where their university is situated, and more broadly. Through their roles, Indigenous leaders were viewed as having significant potential to amplify the Indigenous community voice as well as promote the work of Indigenous academics within the academy. Some participants went on to state that unless their senior Indigenous leader was observed to be working on behalf of the wider Indigenous community, they were not considered a "true" Indigenous leader. These particular beliefs, held by Indigenous academics, align with the ideas of many leadership theorists; that is, Indigenous leadership is heavily related to our responsibilities and commitment to Indigenous communities, with a strong focus on Indigenous sovereignty (Minthorn & Chavez, 2015) and people will not be regarded as leaders unless they are perceived to be putting in place structures and processes that advance the interests of the wider community, external to the primary setting of the workplace (Bolden, Hawkins, Gosling, & Taylor, 2011; Doyle *et al.*, 2020; Warner & Grint, 2006).

In terms of having a relationship with Indigenous communities more broadly, this extends beyond groups of people living in the same place (i.e. Aboriginal nations that are identified and defined by geographical boundaries). Indigenous communities can also include groups of people brought together by a common interest, practice, circumstance or action (Millington, 2021). For example, higher education sector groups, such as the members of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA) would be considered an "Indigenous community of practice". NATSIPA members include Indigenous postgraduate students from several Aboriginal nations across the continent, yet they share the same profession. Regarding an "Indigenous community of action", the Universities Australia Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous Committee is a fine example of a group of people trying to bring about positive change. The committee is comprised of senior

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Indigenous staff from a wide range of Australian universities, tasked with providing key advice to the Universities Australia directorate on all matters relevant to Indigenous inclusion and advancement in Australian universities.

Another important Indigenous community with which senior Indigenous leaders need to have a meaningful relationship is the group of Indigenous academics within their own university (i.e. an Indigenous community of circumstance). Amongst the participating Indigenous academics working at universities where there was a senior Indigenous leader appointed, 17 of the 19 participants (89%) talked about the relationship – in terms of the level of engagement or lack of – between themselves and their senior Indigenous leader. While Indigenous academics expressed varying degrees of engagement and thus strength of the relationship between themselves and their senior Indigenous leader, the consensus concerning the importance of a meaningful relationship was clear: it was seen as an essential component of the senior Indigenous position. Indigenous academics believed senior Indigenous leaders need to have strong and meaningful relationships with Indigenous academics, to provide support and guidance when challenging systemic inequities within Western institutions. The relationship between senior Indigenous leaders and Indigenous academics also seemed to significantly impact Indigenous academic success. Senior Indigenous leaders who were thought to have a meaningful relationship with Indigenous academics were understood to be proactively supporting and developing the careers of Indigenous academics, while those who did not have a meaningful relationship with Indigenous academics were perceived as not developing the careers of Indigenous academics and hence the Indigenous leaders were not viewed as successful.

Having committed and meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities more broadly, as seen in the two examples presented here, is considered essential for senior Indigenous leadership as it also provides Indigenous leaders with a wider and more comprehensive understanding of the expectations, sensitivities and politics associated with Indigenous higher education (Trudgett *et al.*, 2021). These understandings will allow senior Indigenous leaders to make appropriate changes to policy, practices and existing structures; and, importantly, to advance Indigenous success within the academy.

Advocacy and visibility

> The strength is also in being able to lobby . . . lobby for a university-wide approach to Indigenous initiatives . . . they play a big role in advocacy and establishing governance mechanism that engages with Indigenous staff at all levels. (Indigenous Academic)

Advocacy and the need for Indigenous Peoples to be visible are not new concepts for Indigenous Australians. As Aboriginal protection policies emerged across Australia in the early 1900s, Indigenous advocacy groups and political organisations also emerged to demand rights and freedoms (Foster, 2018). Thus, the very notion of Indigenous leadership often carries with it a responsibility for advocacy and the need to be visible (Doyle *et al.*, 2020; Minthorn & Chavez, 2015). Advocacy and visibility, in this respect, includes Indigenous leaders voicing Indigenous Peoples' needs, strengths and inequities (Aguilera-Black Bear & Tippeconnic, 2015; Haar, Roche, & Brougham, 2019; Minthorn & Chavez, 2015). Yet, advocacy and visibility within Australian higher education, while the Indigenous education landscape has changed considerably over time, following a number of activist movements commencing in the early 1960s, there is clear evidence that there is still work to be done (Coates *et al.*, 2021).

In 2017, Page *et al.* examined Indigenous leadership and student participation rates and traced advances made in Indigenous higher education over the previous three decades (Page *et al.*, 2017). Pleasingly, they reported that by 2017, the number of Indigenous students in higher education settings had increased to record levels. They also reported an increase in senior Indigenous staff employed by Australian universities (Page *et al.*, 2017). Improvements

in both areas were seen as direct results of advocacy by Indigenous staff working in Indigenous Centres within universities across the nation. Nevertheless, despite Indigenous student participation rates increasing, Indigenous students were still less likely to complete their undergraduate degree and remained significantly under-represented in postgraduate courses (Page *et al.*, 2017). More important to this discussion, while appointments of Indigenous Australians to senior positions within Australian universities have increased (Trudgett *et al.*, 2021), the opportunity to build capacity and develop the careers of early career Indigenous academics and researchers alike remains limited.

While Indigenous academics expressed the need for senior Indigenous leaders to advocate for all matters relating to Indigenous education (e.g. decolonising curriculum), the majority emphasised the need for senior Indigenous leaders to campaign for the long-term career development and advancement of Indigenous academics. However, advocacy was not a stand-alone theme that emerged from this research. Going hand in hand with advocacy was visibility: Indigenous academics believed senior Indigenous leaders needed to be visible to their non-Indigenous counterparts before they could begin advocating. Through advocacy and visibility, senior Indigenous leaders contribute to breaking down the systemic inequities within Western institutions, which will contribute to advancing Indigenous success within the academy.

Vision and influence

> One of the important roles is to build good relationships across the university and influence ... it's about building good relationships, ensuring the senior executive, whether it's a chancellor or vice-chancellor, buy-in and are enthusiastic about all Indigenous matters. (Indigenous Academic)

The Indigenous academics in this study shared the belief that one success measure of a senior Indigenous leader is determined by their ability to create a vision that not only promotes the Indigenous agenda, but builds socially and culturally engaged institutions. Equally, Indigenous academics believed that essential to the success of senior Indigenous leadership is the ability to influence others to share the vision. Concepts such as these are not revolutionary: in terms of prominent concepts that inform leadership theories, while leadership theorists offer different styles and models, most concur that all leaders must create a clearly defined vision and, importantly, influence others to share their vision (Doyle *et al.*, 2020; Kouzes & Posner, 2011; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). The vision drives leaders to achieve a goal, particularly when faced with challenges (Housman, 2015). Influencing others to share the vision involves the ability to unite others to fulfil the vision (Housman, 2015).

However, influencing others is by no means an easy task. The senior Indigenous leader's ability to implement their vision can be impacted by resistance from an array of stakeholders (Turner & Angula, 2018), thus creating potential for tension and conflict. Resistance, and therefore potential tension, can also endanger the prospect for innovation and advancement of institutional practices that value Indigenous knowledges, contributions and outcomes (Doyle *et al.*, 2020). Under these circumstances, senior Indigenous leaders must demonstrate unwavering resolve to fulfil the vision (Housman, 2015), thus having the need to exercise resilience and persistence (Coates *et al.*, 2021).

Resilience and persistence

> Aboriginal leaders need to be resilient ... the tireless warrior fighting, that's what we need to do because universities are one of the most colonised places ... otherwise they ignore you if you let them. (Indigenous Academic)

The current findings suggest that Indigenous leaders within higher education settings must exercise persistence and be resilient when embedding the Indigenous higher education

agenda. Specifically, when Indigenous academics spoke about Indigenous leaders needing to be resilient, the majority (89%) explicitly related it to being resilient to the racism facing Indigenous leaders within the academy; a space they believed often discriminates against Indigenous Knowledges and Peoples (Coates *et al.*, 2021). Participants reported that the key to being resilient to racism is to be persistent, while advocating for the rights of Indigenous Peoples. In fact, many participants observed a need for Indigenous leaders to be "thick skinned", requiring them to remain mentally strong within themselves to continue working in the higher education sector. The need for Indigenous leaders to be resilient and persistent to survive the challenging higher education environment is supported by a wide range of literature pertaining to Indigenous leadership (Evans & Ryan, 2019; Fredericks, 2009; Holt & Morgan, 2016; Leitch, 2017; Sinclair, 2007; White, 2009, 2010). Concurring with leading Indigenous leadership experts, Minthorn and Chavez (2015) maintained that Indigenous leaders are required to draw sustenance from strength within when circumnavigating the differing Indigenous and Western perspectives. Sadly, this resilience might be challenging – even unrealistic and untenable – in the long term and potentially damaging to health and spirit.

It is widely recognised that Indigenous leadership is typically perpetual (Calliou & Voyageur, 2007) and therefore Indigenous leaders are prone to mental and emotional exhaustion (Fredericks & White, 2018). Given the exponential pressure and stress associated with Indigenous leadership, and the fact that Indigenous Peoples have been heavily impacted by colonisation (Doyle *et al.*, 2020), it is widely recognised that the practice of Indigenous leadership is framed as an act of resilience and persistence (Aguilera-Black Bear & Tippeconnic, 2015; Coates *et al.*, 2021; Leitch, 2017; Minthorn & Chavez, 2015).

In-depth examination of the Indigenous experiences of resilience within "Western" organisational structures at a senior level has shown that Indigenous leaders continually face challenges related to "being black in white spaces" (Asmar, Mercier, & Page, 2009; Fredericks & White, 2018; White, 2009). Indigenous leaders are persistently challenged culturally; habitually finding themselves navigating between Indigenous and non-Indigenous dissonance (Doyle & Hungerford, 2015; Evans & Ryan, 2019; Leitch, 2017; Minthorn & Chavez, 2015). Indigenous leaders find themselves concurrently situated on the "inside and outside of their Aboriginal culture" (Evans & Sinclair, 2016, p. 473), negotiating the intricate tensions between the organisational requirements of institutions while upholding their cultural values.

Institutional authority

> If we're going to have senior Indigenous leaders, let them actually be leaders and let them have a substantial role that has a high level of decision-making and authority ... however that senior leadership role is termed, they need to have decision-making responsibilities and budget responsibilities for implementing Indigenous research, Indigenous student support processes. (Indigenous Academic)

The term "institutional authority" refers to the degree in which people can make decisions and act on behalf of an organisation (Marmor, 2011). The level of institutional authority given to individuals is determined by the organisation, ensuring individuals can meet their role responsibilities (Lopes, 2020). Disappointingly however, while senior Indigenous roles were perceived in this research as an opportunity to make decisions, implement change and hold higher education institutions accountable when working towards improving Indigenous education outcomes, some participants were doubtful, believing senior Indigenous leaders did not hold the level of institutional authority required to successfully fulfil their role. In this sense, some Indigenous academics in the study believed the senior Indigenous role was tokenistic and the motivation for creating such positions was simply a symbolic way to

appear inclusive to members of the Indigenous community (Coates *et al.*, 2021). Some participants also believed the lack of institutional authority held by senior Indigenous leaders was due to systemic problems associated with the workplace culture of the university.

These scepticism about institutional commitment held by Indigenous academics should be of concern to university leadership. Senior Indigenous leaders are considered responsible for holding the institution accountable in terms of dismantling the power structures within the academy to ensure Indigenous Australians can participate and succeed in higher education (Trudgett *et al.*, 2021). Senior Indigenous leaders are also responsible for creating career opportunities to promote Indigenous academic success (Coates *et al.*, 2021), yet they do not always appear to have the appropriate level of institutional authority to achieve this. This is a tension that university executives and senior Indigenous leaders will need to navigate in tandem, to ensure the confidence of Indigenous staff in institutional strategies for Indigenous success.

Given these worrying perceptions, Australian universities are strongly urged to review the level of authority currently given to senior Indigenous leaders, ensuring they can meet their role responsibilities. This starts with ensuring that senior Indigenous leaders have the necessary level of institutional authority to advance Indigenous academic success.

Summary

The intent of leadership is to work collaboratively with others to achieve a collective goal and improve the situation, whatever that situation may be. However, Indigenous leadership extends beyond meeting organisational objectives and has a strong focus on Indigenous sovereignty and the advancement of Indigenous educational success. Indigenous leaders carry the responsibility of dismantling and rebuilding systems that continue to cause inequity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, through tireless and selfless advocacy and action. Indigenous leaders are committed to raising the voices of Indigenous communities, not just for the people of today, but for future generations.

The contextualised Indigenist model of leadership presented in this article not only centres the voices of Indigenous academics from across the nation, but is also aligned with cultural protocols, professional expectations and personal characteristics, values and behaviours. Each of the six components go hand in hand; together they are built upon the core characteristics, values and behaviours that senior Indigenous leaders need to aspire to achieve, according to Indigenous academics and are equally essential to senior Indigenous leadership for the reasons articulated in this article. For example, without the appropriate level of institutional authority, other components such as advocacy, visibility, vision and influence may fall short. Given Australian universities are being called upon to ensure that senior Indigenous leaders are in the best position possible to forge institutional change, senior Indigenous leaders within the academy may find the contextual Indigenous leadership model beneficial. The model allows one to uphold cultural integrity, and fulfil the responsibilities and obligations of their higher education institution, while being able to serve their Indigenous colleagues and communities, leading to the advancement of Indigenous higher education outcomes.

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