

# All Hands-on Deck: Coordinated approaches to Indigenous early career development

Michelle Locke , Michelle Trudgett and Susan Page

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Article abstract

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## All Hands-on Deck: Coordinated Approaches to Indigenous Early Career Development

Michelle Locke

*Western Sydney University, Australia, m.locke@westernsydney.edu.au*

Michelle Trudgett

*Western Sydney University, Australia, michelle.trudgett@westernsydney.edu.au*

Susan Page

*Western Sydney University, Australia, s.page@westernsydney.edu.au*

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# All Hands-on Deck: Coordinated Approaches to Indigenous Early Career Development

## Abstract

The Developing Indigenous Early Career Researchers Project is a three-year longitudinal study funded by the Australian Research Council exploring the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous early career researchers working in universities across Australia. In an earlier paper we explored self-identified needs of Indigenous early career researchers regarding the development of sound research trajectories and careers in the academy (Locke et al., 2022). This paper takes a step further in investigating, who is responsible and should be held to account for supporting the development of these Indigenous early carer researchers. Data collected from across all three stages (2020, 2021 and 2022) of this project suggests that Indigenous early career researchers consider that all university staff, including themselves have certain responsibilities towards developing their academic career trajectories. Some Indigenous ECRs also pointed out the roles that external agencies such as government and funding bodies play in guiding institutions to value and promote the diversity and wealth of knowledge that Indigenous academics bring to the academy. This paper engages an Indigenist research approach and employs relatedness theory in advocating the development of policies and programs to support the career trajectories of Indigenous Early Career Researchers, from an Indigenous epistemological standpoint. To close, this paper posits that to achieve optimum outcomes for Indigenous ECR's there needs to be systematic and coordinated institutional approaches to developing career trajectories that ameliorate challenges and barriers to Indigenous ECR career progression.

## Keywords

Indigenous, early career researcher, trajectory, higher education, racism

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## All Hands-on Deck: Coordinated Approaches to Indigenous Early Career Development

In its *Indigenous Strategy 2022-25*, Universities Australia (2022) states that its aim is to move from its previous iterations of identifying aspirations for change to implementing strategies that will generate and produce successful results for Indigenous staff and students. Of specific relevance to this paper, Universities Australia (2022, p.19) states: “For staff, the focus will be on opportunity, career development and leadership structures, including opportunity to develop academic research careers and to move into senior positions.” It is noted in this strategy that Vice Chancellors and senior management are responsible and accountable to lead and promote the *Indigenous Strategy 2022-25* with a view to increasing the number of Indigenous staff holding senior positions. It also reiterates the position of the *National Indigenous Higher Education Workforce Strategy* (Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2011) (IHEAC) that Indigenous skills, capacity, and knowledges should be the driving focus of Indigenous engagement and success, rather than from a legislated moral obligation. This preference encourages a shift of focus from a deficit view of Indigenous scholars to a strengths-based approach (Enari & Matapo, 2021). It recognises that the presence and leadership of Indigenous scholars in the higher education sector builds a workforce that will enrich institutions through their capacity for research and teaching (Brayboy et al., 2015; Coates et al., 2020; Holt & Morgan, 2016).

Relatedly, the Australian Research Council (ARC) *Developing Indigenous Early Career Researchers* project investigated and explored the perspectives and experiences of the career development of 30 Australian Indigenous early career researchers (ECRs) in a three-year longitudinal study. Data from this project has highlighted barriers and challenges faced specifically by Indigenous ECRs that are not normally experienced by non-Indigenous academics (Locke et al., 2021, 2022; Povey et al., 2022). These reported findings are supported by the work of other Indigenous and First Nations scholars<sup>1</sup> who also note specific challenges that include the underrepresentation of Indigenous academics and professionals in the higher education sector (Coates et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2021; Thunig & Jones, 2020), being first in family to attend university or complete a university qualification (Barney, 2013; Fredericks & White, 2018; Locke et al., 2021), a lack of recognition of the level of community and family responsibilities of Indigenous peoples (Brayboy et al., 2015; Naepi et al., 2020; Page & Asmar, 2008), as well as continuing examples of micro and systemic racism across the higher education sector (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Fredericks, 2011; Locke et al., 2022).

Having identified challenges and barriers in previous publications (Locke et al., 2021, 2022) this paper brings to light Indigenous ECR perspectives regarding who is responsible and accountable to support their academic career trajectories. Overall, a common theme among Indigenous ECRs was that the progression of Indigenous academic careers is everybody’s business, and that this includes both Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders, and Indigenous ECRs themselves.

To begin, this paper provides a snapshot of the career progression of Indigenous ECR’s participating in this study across three years. Using an Indigenous methodological approach (Martin, 2008; Rigney, 1999) the paper explores roles and responsibilities of varying stakeholders identified from the

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper the terms “*Indigenous*” refers to Australian Indigenous Peoples and “*First Nations*” refers to Indigenous Peoples from countries other than Australia.

experiences and perspectives of Indigenous ECRs. Finally, the paper advocates that institutional policies and practices focused on the development of Indigenous ECRs must be developed from an Indigenous standpoint at all institutional levels. In using this approach, institutional policies and practices are more inclined to firstly understand and recognise specific challenges faced by Indigenous ECRs and secondly identify and value the unique skills and knowledges that Indigenous ECRs bring to the academy.

### **Indigenous Relatedness**

Developing and supporting Indigenous ECRs within the academy requires an understanding of what it is to be an Indigenous academic in an institution founded on Western and neoliberal values of competitiveness and success (Naepi et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2021; Tynan, 2021). Multiple Indigenous scholars and First Nations peoples have reported on the competitive nature of the higher education sector, and that it is an uneven and at times a traumatic playing field for Indigenous and First Nations academics (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2021; Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2007; Fredericks, 2011; Smith et al., 2021; Thunig & Jones, 2020). Certainly, the competitive and individualistic nature of academia (Mohamed & Beagan, 2019; Naepi et al., 2020; Povey et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021; Tynan, 2021) is in vast contrast to Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, which necessitates respect, responsibility, and accountability for all peoples and entities (Bishop, 2022; Martin, 2008; Wilson, 2008; Yunkaporta, 2019).

Quandamooka scholar Karen Martin (2008) informs that the conditions of respect, responsibility, and accountability enable Indigenous Peoples to confirm and retain their relatedness with themselves and all elements of Country, such as peoples, animals, plants, waterways, landscapes, and sky. In writing about Indigenous education sovereignty, Gamilaroi scholar Michelle Bishop (2022) notes that relationality in Indigenous terms is devoid of the hierarchical notions of superiority that educational institutions are grounded on. Rather, Indigenous relationality draws attention to the perspective that everyone, including all entities, are connected and as such are expected to be respectful, responsible, and accountable to one another (Martin, 2008; Wilson, 2008; Yunkaporta, 2019).

Relationality is reciprocal you see, balancing care, warmth, and understanding with responsibilities, obligations, and respect. No one person or entity is better or more than the other. This form of connection is not based on positional authority, or a system of rewards and punishments, but rather a commitment to fulfilling your relational obligations (Bishop, 2022, p.140).

If we apply Indigenous relatedness theory (Martin, 2008; Wilson, 2008, 2016; Yunkaporta, 2019; Yunkaporta & Shillingsworth, 2020) to the higher education sector, all people and organisations that make up the academy would be viewed as being related to one another, and as such each stakeholder that comes into contact with an Indigenous ECR would be held responsible and accountable to their development and career progression.

## Listening to Indigenous Early Career Researcher Perspectives

This paper reports on findings from online interviews conducted with 30 Indigenous ECRs, from across Australia in 2020 (Stage One) and 28 Indigenous ECRs in 2021 (Stage Two) and 2022 (Stage Three). The *Developing Indigenous ECRs* project is a three-year longitudinal study funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC). Using a qualitative methods approach, Indigenous ECRs were invited to share their stories and experiences in semi-structured and culturally safe interviews (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010).

A total of 30 Indigenous ECRs participated in Stage One (2020) interviews, however in stage two (2021) this number dropped to 28 as two participants were unable to participate due to health reasons, unrelated to COVID-19. At the beginning of this study in 2020, participating Indigenous ECRs were employed in 21 different institutions across Australia in a variety of roles, with the majority (90%) of ECRs employed at either Academic Level B or C.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the original cohort consisted of 12 Indigenous ECRs located in New South Wales, ten in Queensland, and two each in Victoria, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory (Locke et al., 2021).

The original plan was to interview as many participants in person as possible. However, in March 2020, four states and one Australian territory had already introduced border restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, in order for the project to go ahead, researchers decided to conduct interviews via Zoom, a cloud-based video conferencing service. In Stage One (2020), 29 Indigenous ECRs were interviewed via Zoom, and one participant was interviewed over the phone as they were yet to gain access to Zoom. In Stages 2 (2021) and 3 (2022), Zoom was employed for all interviews.

All interviews were transcribed by a professional service and then forwarded to the appropriate Indigenous ECR participant for approval. The approved transcripts were uploaded to the qualitative data analysis computer software package NVivo 12. Demographic data and broad themes were initially coded by the first author. This was followed by a deeper thematic analysis of data that examined examples of support and recorded Indigenous ECR perspectives of organisational, individual, and external supports available and necessary for the progression of their academic careers.

The research was conducted by three Indigenous scholars, comprising two professors (authors two and three) and an Indigenous early career researcher (author one). A three-year longitudinal approach was employed to follow and track the experiences and career progression of the participating Indigenous ECRs, which is conducive to Murray et al.'s (2009, p.339) "exploration of evolving and complex processes." Researchers agreed that a longitudinal project would increase the likelihood of developing trustful research relationships with Indigenous participants (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Martin, 2008), as well as provide vital insight into their career trajectories and how best to support their development. Pseudonyms were used for all participants, in some cases Indigenous ECRs chose their own while others gave permission for the researchers to choose a pseudonym on their behalf. For the purposes of this

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<sup>2</sup> In the Australian Higher Education sector, academic staff are employed across five levels. Level A is the first or entry level for new academics, who might hold a position such as Associate Lecturer, Associate Researcher, or Postdoctoral Research Fellow. Level B includes Lecturer or Research Fellow. Level C academics are Senior Lecturers and/or Senior researchers. Level D academics fulfil Associate Professor positions, while Level E are Professors.

paper, direct participant quotes are recorded with the participant's pseudonym followed by the interview stage (i.e., Stage 1, Stage 2, or Stage 3) from which the quote was sourced.

### **Responsibility and Accountability to the Development of Indigenous Early Career Researchers.**

Findings from this study are divided into three sections associated with Indigenous ECR employment and career progression. The first section provides an overview of the levels at which Indigenous ECRs were employed and how they changed over the three-year study. The second section features the specific experiences of the Indigenous ECRs that highlight institutional inconsistencies that impact academic recognition and promotion. In the third section, we present six groups identified in the data as responsible and accountable for developing and supporting Indigenous ECR career trajectories. It is understandable that careers are built over time and that things such as family, community commitments, COVID-19, and personal health can get in the way (Locke et al., 2022; Povey et al., 2022). However, these findings show that what is really required is systematic and coordinated approaches to growing and developing Indigenous ECRs.

### **Indigenous ECR Employment Levels**

Before examining responsibility and accountability for the development of Indigenous ECRs, it is pertinent to briefly review the career progression of the Indigenous ECRs who participated in this study. In doing so, it is wise to reiterate that there are a number of underlying factors affecting Indigenous ECR career progression, such as the number of years employed in the higher education sector and/or employment changes, such as moving to a different faculty or institution and/or fulfilling temporary or multiple roles (Locke et al., 2022). As a result, Indigenous ECR career progression will also be examined in greater detail in a forthcoming longitudinal paper. However, an overall review of Indigenous ECR employment levels provides a snapshot of the rate at which Indigenous ECRs were promoted over the three-year study and the level at which the majority of Indigenous ECRs were employed by the third and final year of the project.

**Table 1. Indigenous Early Career Researcher Employment Levels 2020-2022**

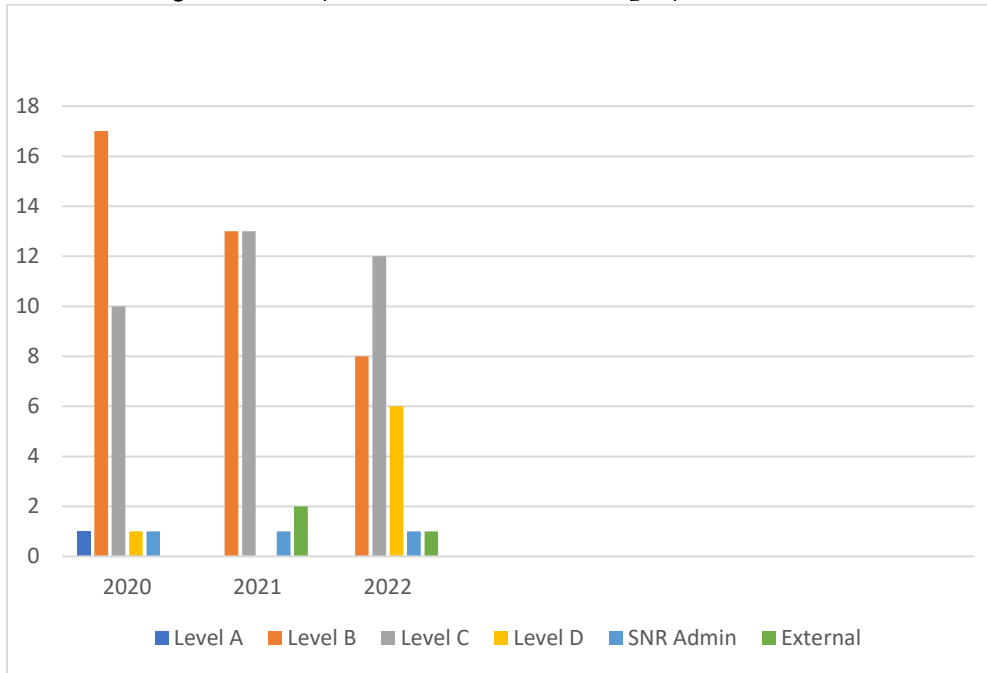


Table 1 shows the movement of Indigenous ECR employment levels between the first (2020) and last (2022) stages of this study. There are two labels that do not represent employment levels but are relevant nevertheless. Firstly, the label “external” refers to Indigenous ECRs who sought and secured employment outside of the academy. For instance, graphed data shows in 2021, two Indigenous ECRs left the academy, and in 2022 one of these participants returned to the higher education sector. While these Indigenous ECRs were no longer employees of a university, both maintained collegial connections with Indigenous staff and on occasion provided cultural advice to university staff or committees. Secondly, the label “N/A” identifies the Indigenous ECRs who withdrew from this study in 2021 and 2022 due to personal health issues.

To examine Indigenous ECR progression, we look firstly to data related to Level B positions. Table 1 shows that at the beginning of the project (2020), 57 percent of Indigenous ECRs were employed in Level B positions. Following this the number of Indigenous ECRs employed at Academic Level B decreased by four in 2021 and five in 2022. This decrease is representative of the following factors.

In 2021:

- 4 Indigenous ECRs had been promoted from Level B to C
- 1 Level B left the academy
- 1 Indigenous ECR had been promoted from Level A to Level B.



In 2022:

- four Indigenous ECRs were promoted from Level B to Level C
- 1 Level B left the study

Data for employment at Level C indicates the promotion of three Indigenous ECRs from Level B to Level C in 2021. Five Indigenous ECRs were promoted from Level C to Level D in 2022. However, in 2022 the number of Level C positions dropped by only one, as four Indigenous ECRs had also been promoted from Level B to Level C in that same year. Thus the table indicates that the number of Indigenous ECRs in Level C positions was relatively consistent across the three years.

Finally, the table shows that in 2022 six Indigenous ECRs were employed at Level D. This number is indicative of the promotion of five Indigenous ECRs from Level C to D and the return of an Indigenous ECR who had left the academy (but remained in the study) in 2021 as a Level B and returned in 2022 to a Level D position. The absence of a Level D position in 2021 is the result of an Indigenous ECR holding the Level D position in 2020 left the academy at the end of that same year and did not return. They did, however, continue their engagement with the study, as they were engaged on occasion (no fixed term) as a consultant to university staff on occasion.

Whilst not implicit in the table, it is interesting to note that by the last year of this project (2022), career progression of 28 Indigenous ECRs can be summarised in the following manner:

- 16 Indigenous ECRs maintained the same level of employment from 2020 to 2022.
- 2 Indigenous ECR were promoted one level in 2021.
- 7 Indigenous ECRs were promoted one level in 2022.
- 3 Indigenous ECRs were promoted one level in both 2021 and 2022.

Clearly there is room for further scrutiny and investigation of this data, but for the purposes of this paper it is pertinent to note that in 2022 Universities Australia reported that despite some evidence of an increase in Indigenous staff employment there remains significant disparity of employment and promotion between Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics. Specifically, in relation to Indigenous academic positions it was noted that,

Indigenous academic staff were employed in lower proportions at the levels of senior lecturer and above, compared to non-Indigenous staff. In 2019, 18.2 per cent of Indigenous staff were employed at the level of senior lecturer (Level C) compared to 22.3 per cent for non-Indigenous, and 24.9 per cent of Indigenous staff were employed above the senior lecturer level (Level D and above) compared to 29.5 per cent for non-Indigenous (Universities Australia, 2022, p.30).

## **Indigenous ECR Career Recognition and Promotion**

Indigenous ECRs participating in this study shared inconsistencies in the levels at which they were employed and the duties they were assigned. For example, Julie expressed frustration that her title remained Senior Lecturer even though they fulfilled the same duties as previous incumbents employed at a higher level.

All the duties and everything—everyone else at my level—and this position was always appointed at a professor level. Previous people who have been in this position didn't have a PhD. A whole range of other things—but were appointed at the Professor level. It's been a little bit of frustration and I often don't get the—with the way the university system works. (Julie, Stage 3)

Likewise, Eli expressed confusion and frustration with institutional inconsistencies regarding recognition and promotion.

To date, I feel proud of my achievements, but also kind of despondent on the kind of barriers that have been put in place that have knocked me back. What I mean by that is that I'm only three years out from my PhD. I'm already Senior Lecturer. But then when I look around and look at other people, I see that people are being promoted to—or even entering after completing their PhD to level D. (Stage 3)

In contrast, Mica shared their experience where it was acknowledged by colleagues and the institution that their workload and responsibilities warranted a promotion. However, their application for promotion was stymied as the result of a stringent and inflexible process.

I kept getting told—you know those amazing mentors that I was telling you about, they kept saying to me, [Mica], you should be looking at a Level D, you're doing a lot, your profile is really solid, you should actually be looking to go for promotion this year. I go to the institution, and they tell me that, yeah, you are but you don't really talk about what you're doing in the way that you need to for a promotion. (Stage 2)

In sharing this experience Mica explained that the promotion process required extensive narratives as well as records/evidence of all the work they have been engaged in and completed. At the time of this interview (2021 Stage 2), Mica stated that they decided to wait until the following year to apply for the promotion. Concerningly, in the following interview (2022 Stage 3) Mica reported the following:

I had a conversation with my head of school about promotion because I kept getting told by more senior people, you are leading millions of dollars of research. You need to go for promotion. I went and talked to my head of school who promptly told me, "Oh no, you don't meet the criteria."

It is clear from the comments above that career progression for Indigenous ECRs is not clear cut or transparent. The examples shared above demonstrate mixed messaging regarding prerequisites for

promotion. Additionally, a lack of recognition of additional challenges, roles, and responsibilities undertaken by Indigenous ECRs means that Indigenous ECRs will inevitably do more work to secure promotion than their non-Indigenous colleagues (Mohamed & Beagan, 2019; Naepi et al., 2020; Page & Asmar, 2008; Thunig & Jones, 2020).

### **Responsibility and Accountability: All Hands-on Deck**

Indigenous ECRs participating in this project indicated that developing and supporting Indigenous ECR career trajectories is everyone's responsibility. They identified that stakeholders, including Indigenous ECRs, supervisors, managers, heads of faculty, policy makers, senior executives, and external bodies, all play a role and are accountable to the academic progression and success of Indigenous ECRs.

The whole of university is responsible. It's not Indigenous units' responsibility, it's not Indigenous scholars, it's not Indigenous academics' responsibility. It's the whole of the university that is responsible. That's from the top all the way down. They need to provide money and resources and a real commitment. If they're really serious about progressing Indigenous academics, it will be more than just speaking, it will be action. (Maree, Stage 2)

I think it's everyone's responsibility [to support the development of Indigenous ECRs] and I think the problem right now is everybody thinks it an Indigenous person's responsibility. (Mica, Stage 2)

Importantly, several Indigenous ECRs specifically noted that this responsibility extends to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

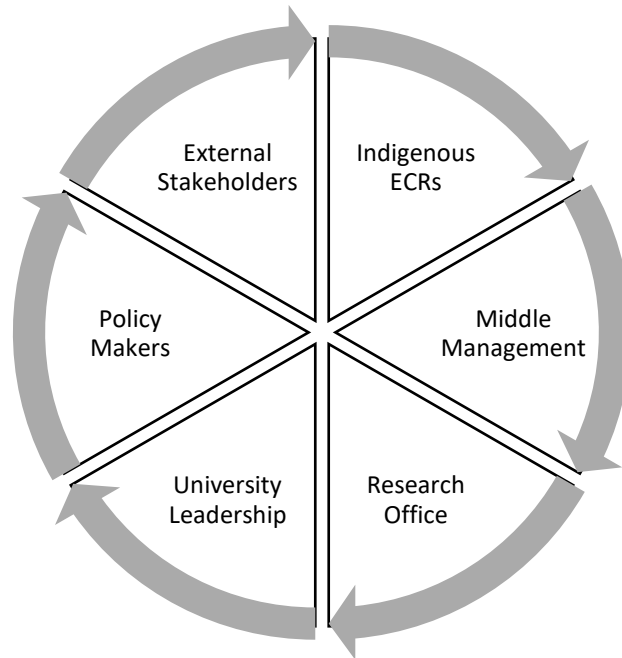
I would like to say I think it's everybody's responsibility, as in, it's the institution's responsibility, it's the white academic's responsibility, it's the black academics responsibility—I think it needs to be shared. I think the only ways that we can really build space is by showing mob<sup>3</sup> that we're not going to deny them support but we have to make sure that our doors are open. (Martha, Stage 2)

Oh yeah, it's everybody's responsibility. If you're in research, it doesn't matter whether you're Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, you have a responsibility to do it. Well, no, let's not say—I don't even know if that's the right word, a responsibility. You have the capability to do it, so do it. If you've—you're going to talk about building capacity of people, put your money where your mouth is and do it and it actually doesn't matter who's who. (Skywalker, Stage 2)

Six main groups of people have been identified and their role in supporting Indigenous ECRs examined. These groupings, as identified in Figure 1, begin with Indigenous ECRs themselves and include stakeholders from within and those that work outside the academy.

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<sup>3</sup> The term "mob" refers to the Aboriginal family and community that an Aboriginal person belongs to.



**Figure 1. Groups Responsible and Accountable to Supporting the Development of Indigenous Early Career Researchers**

**(i) Indigenous Early Career Researchers.** All Indigenous ECRs participating in this research bring a wealth of experiences, knowledges, and skills to the benefit of the institutions in which they are employed (Locke et al., 2021, 2022). While a variety of stakeholders were identified, each Indigenous ECR demonstrated ownership and responsibility for the development of their own careers as Indigenous academics.

I think you have to pull on your own—what is it, your own shoe strap, shoestrings? (Patricia, Stage 2)

Probably me. I've always been one who's said, well, I think there is a degree or—you can have support systems and that, but I think leadership without accepting personal responsibility, and I think first and foremost they'll say, well, try to develop it. You have to own it. (Cooper, Stage 2)

A common strategy to strengthen skills, knowledge, and career opportunities among Indigenous ECRs was to seek out and rely on Indigenous academic networks.

I think having particularly a strong Indigenous academic village is what made the difference. (Sasha, Stage 1)

So, the kind of networks that we established within that [Indigenous course], that's invaluable because we're feeling the same pain. We're trying to navigate the system as we're entering it. (Eli, Stage 2)

It is a [Indigenous] village. We work incredibly well together, we publish together, we include everybody. Everyone gets included in the things that we do. (James, Stage 3)

Many Indigenous ECRs identified their role in creating and building Indigenous academic pathways in order to strengthen their own career trajectories as well as developing pathways and providing support to other Indigenous peoples. Cooper and Kimberly expressed their desire of creating pathways for Indigenous Peoples to increase Indigenous representation in their field of expertise,

We're at a perfect age to be able to pass on our skills and experiences and help train the next generation of Aboriginal people who might want to do this kind of work (Araeu, Stage 2).

I want to do my content area and stick to my lane, but do it really, really well. That's enough to keep me going for the rest of my career. It's not like there's development across—just for [specific field]. So, I'd like to build them. I'd like to be the person who builds that for, build career pathways, research pathways. (Cooper, Stage 1)

That's kind of what I'm trying to bring to my [specific field] work role with the students. I'm trying to build up a real community of future [specific field] workers so that we know that we've all got each other's backs. (Kimberly, Stage 1)

So, I'm doing projects at the moment with undergrad students as RAs [research assistants] and things like that so they're getting exposure to research. So, starting to develop and be able to see a real clear pathway and pipeline for Aboriginal people coming into those projects. (Skywalker, Stage 1)

Indigenous ECRs are providing opportunities and networks for Indigenous students while at the same time building on their own mentoring and leadership skills. This approach is also indicative of the way in which Indigenous ECRs enact their cultural responsibilities and accountabilities to Indigenous communities and to future Indigenous scholars.

**(ii) Middle management.** This group of people includes Indigenous ECR supervisors and heads of schools who hold leadership roles and are instrumental in the implementation, if not development of policies that value and foster the work of Indigenous academics in specific institutions and faculties. Many Indigenous ECRs shared desires for academics in these positions to work with them in developing career plans and sharing information of opportunities relevant to their specific career trajectories.

I think it's your research area, your division, your supervisors, whoever you're answerable to, whoever is in your team, I think it's—well actually I think it's both. I think it's you and them together, working, negotiating, looking at the future, looking at your plans, your aspirations. (Leila, Stage 2)

William and Susan noted that these roles and responsibilities need to be formalised to firstly ensure senior academics are held to account in offering support and guidance to Indigenous ECRs and secondly that the efforts made are formally recognised and remunerated.

So, it needs to be then driven downwards, such that all the people who are below the PVICIs<sup>4</sup> and the vice chancellors are held to account, but in a positive way, to look for opportunities, and to get credibility out of doing important work. So, the heads of school, that the mentors, the deans of faculties, and so on and so forth, have a responsibility. (William, Stage 2)

Clearly the supervisor has a day-to-day role in mentoring. There does need to be—I think there needs to be systems in place to recognise that. You need to ensure that a Director of an Indigenous Centre or the Head of School and supervisors of Indigenous ECRs, have the mentoring role built into their overarching responsibilities—that is, someone is looking out to see that those ECRs are being mentored. (Susan, Stage 2)

In formalising this responsibility, institutions can ensure that Indigenous ECRs are not left to navigate the system on their own. Also, supervisors are less likely to be overburdened if mentoring is an officially recognised part of their role. This is particularly pertinent to Indigenous academics who, as the literature has evidenced, are often encumbered with additional support responsibilities not necessarily experienced by their non-Indigenous colleagues (Asmar & Page, 2018; Naepi et al., 2020; Thunig & Jones, 2020).

The managers need to ensure that the environment that they're providing within their areas is conducive to those ECRs' success, whether that be from a cultural perspective or whether that be from providing those opportunities that we talked about. But they need to be mindful that sometimes there's different challenges and barriers, and sometimes there's different responsibilities, and they need to look outside their own lens and to consider the reality of those staff members. (Hannah, Stage 3)

Providing support and guidance to Indigenous ECRs requires a sound understanding and appreciation of the diversity of both the challenges and benefits Indigenous scholars face and bring respectively to the academy. Critically, this level of understanding can only be gained through genuine engagement, collaboration, and leadership from Indigenous scholars and ECRs.

**(iii) Research Office.** Transparency about research funding and policies was highlighted as a crucial role of an institution's research office. Indigenous ECRs provided examples in which they sought or lacked assistance in understanding institutional policies and limitations related to grants and specific research funding.

The main problems are in the budget. So, even working with somebody who has their head around the finance and funding side of things and how to do budgets. There's a really good lad in [institution] who's done the, just what do I call it? Look over, the critique of the project, and

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<sup>4</sup> PVICI is an acronym for Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous.

he's picked up so many holes in the budget that we haven't thought about. So, I might even see if I can get him to do a little in-service or little training with me. (Leila Stage 2)

Valid support and guidance regarding research budgets was especially pertinent for Indigenous ECRs who had to make significant changes to research projects as a result of COVID-19. Susan shared a highly stressful experience in which changes to the use of funds for projects affected by COVID-19 was unclear and misleading.

Have someone in the research office say okay, now, if you're doing this that's fantastic but this is what's going to happen with your money, like work it out, not just tell someone at the end of it, "no, sorry." (Susan Stage 3)

Some Indigenous ECRs shared that their mentors or supervisors provided sound guidance and training about designing a research budget, while others struggled to gain clear information or ongoing support in this critical area.

**(iv) University Leadership.** In contemplating who is most responsible and accountable for the development of Indigenous ECRs, most participants identified that those in executive roles have the greatest power to make decisions at the managerial level. University leadership included Indigenous senior appointments such as Pro Vice-Chancellors Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders in executive positions.

PVCs, Pro Vice-Chancellors, I think that's probably who. I know they have enormous responsibilities and everything, but I do think that ultimately they're probably responsible. (Cate, Stage 2)

The executives of the universities, because they're the ones with the decision-making power; so, the Directors of institutes or the Vice-Chancellors. (Sarah, Stage 2)

Further Kimberly noted that to effectively support Indigenous ECRs universities need to employ Indigenous leaders.

I think that the university needs to give capacity to Indigenous leaders to be able to fulfil the responsibility. (Kimberly, Stage 2)

Likewise, Eli pointed out the specialised experiences and learned skills that Indigenous leaders have to offer Indigenous ECRs.

So, I would say it's definitely the Indigenous professors' responsibilities because of that knowledge and understanding, that lived experience, that collegiality, relationality sort of thing. Because they're already being through the system themselves. They know the shit that is there, they can help you navigate. (Stage 2)

These points were also raised in literature authored by Indigenous scholars identifying the need to increase employment of Senior Indigenous staff to better build and strengthen Indigenous ECR career trajectories (Behrendt et al., 2012; Coates et al., 2020; Locke et al., 2022; Povey et al., 2021).

I think, thinking about the bigger picture, one of the things that seems to be working at this university is there is a series of—there's a whole bunch of Aboriginal executives. So really building that leadership in the university as a whole. So, we've got [Indigenous Deans in more than one school] you know, and really building a strong Indigenous representation in those leadership roles. From there, the ground up stuff is important, but the top-down stuff is still important too. (Jessie, Stage 3)

The main focus among Indigenous ECRs regarding university leadership was on the need for a concerted effort to increase the number of Indigenous scholars in executive roles. The general consensus is that the executive level of academy has the most power to affect positive change.

**(v) Policy Makers.** In universities the development of policies that dictate employment requirements and conditions such as academic workloads are usually undertaken by a committee of academics in consultation with the union. Understandably the availability of stable and secure employment within higher education was of great importance to Indigenous ECRs (as with all staff). However, a number of Indigenous ECRs commented on the precarity of employment resulting from a lack of permanent options.

We need to have real jobs, not ongoing contracts, short contracts, temporary contracts, little scholarships, fellowships, not all of the scholarships that are short-term for more junior people. We need real outcomes at the end, and they are in the form of tenured, ongoing positions. (Maree, Stage 2)

Areau noted Indigenous researchers in her institution were interested in succession planning. However, to successfully attract and retain upcoming Indigenous scholars, Areau stressed the necessity to provide secure, ongoing employment options.

We're at a perfect age to be able to pass on our skills and experiences and help train the next generation of Aboriginal people who might want to do this kind of work. But actually, finding meaningful, not contract, not casual work . . . Secure, continued work for Aboriginal people. (Areau, stage 2)

This is an important consideration for institutional policy makers if they are genuinely committed to building an Indigenous academic workforce. Indigenous ECRs participating in this study also expressed frustration at the lack of understanding or ignorance of the ways in which their identity is intrinsically linked with their ability to fulfil their roles as Indigenous academics. The way in which institutions attempt to separate academic work from responsibilities and accountabilities to Indigenous Country and community greatly conflicts with Indigenous ontological and epistemological views of being.



But it is actually crucial to your role because I could not be an Indigenous [position title] without being seen in the community or held to, not high esteem, but held in a certain way that I contribute [and am accountable] to that community. (Olive, Stage 2)

The thing that's really weird and I've tried arguing my point, but it doesn't seem to compute with other people at the university, is that they want to know how much of your time is spent on Indigenous engagement and I say, well 100 per cent of the time because I'm Indigenous. So, I really tick all the boxes for that, but oh we can't, that doesn't, it has to add to 100 percent for a total of what you do, which is insane. (Eva, Stage 1)

Some Indigenous ECRs mentioned their own efforts in attempting to raise awareness in their own faculties or institutions of the unseen roles and responsibilities that Indigenous staff fulfill.

That's where I've been advocating in this new role to try and kind of consider academic progression, getting our Indigenous staff on there, getting them acknowledged for all that additional, unseen work that we do. (Julie, Stage 1)

While *policy maker* is not a specific position in the academy, it is critical that those actively involved in developing and implementing employment policies understand the unique challenges and barriers faced by Indigenous ECRs. In addition, it is paramount to also recognise that the presence and leadership of Indigenous scholars enriches institutions through their unique cultural connections and capacity for research and teaching. From this perspective it is necessary to review and restructure employment policy committees to ensure that people such as Indigenous ECRs are respectfully and effectively represented.

**vi) External Stakeholders.** Sector policy development, funding, and advocacy were all identified as areas in which external agencies could advocate and influence the level of support and guidance universities offer Indigenous ECRs. Cooper, Jessie, and Olive all commented specifically on a lack of funding for Indigenous research as well as questionable practices with monies granted to Indigenous research projects in which Indigenous researchers were absent. Also in relation to funding, Shaun expressed frustration regarding funding body timeframes and deadlines that are not conducive to the way in which culturally respectful research is conducted

That's a key challenge that when working with community, you need to have a little bit of flexibility with that because you know, as soon as you start pushing it, the mob push back. (Stage 1)

This is indicative of Western based systems and processes that develop and dictate research terms and conditions with little to no consultation with Indigenous scholars or communities (Enari & Matapo, 2021; Smith, 2021).

Sarah, James, and Jessie expressed a shared belief in the role that organisations such as Universities Australia play in informing, influencing, and shaping policies related to Indigenous engagement and employment across the higher education sector. In particular, Jessie said:

I think perhaps organisations like that [Universities Australia] or institutions like AIATSIS<sup>5</sup> and the NTEU<sup>6</sup> could take a leadership role, if not in providing funding, but in advocacy. (Jessie, Stage 2)

Specifically, Areau highlighted an issue associated with the underrepresentation of Indigenous academics and the ability to provide culturally appropriate mentorship or supervision to Indigenous ECRs (Sione, Stanley & Enari, 2023). She stated that part of Universities Australia's Indigenous strategy should:

encourage all universities to sign up to [an agreement] to allow Indigenous academics to supervise across institutions. The institutions should take that as part of their contribution to the larger cause of getting more Aboriginal people qualified in the sector. Whether or not they do it, I mean that's my big policy shift that I would like to see happen. (Stage 3)

In examining each of the individual groups identified by Indigenous ECRs it is important to appreciate that they do not function in isolation. As sections of the higher education sector, they are all part of a hierarchical structure in which success is viewed as a product of competition and productivity (Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Tynan, 2021). However, Cree Scholar Shawn Wilson (2016, p.16) emphasises:

Indigenist research works from a worldview in which knowledge is relational: Indigenous people are not in relationships, they are relationships.

Thus, from an Indigenous standpoint, responsibility and accountability for the development of Indigenous ECRs is positioned as the role of many stakeholders who are also responsible and accountable to one another.

## Discussion

The hierarchical nature of the academy is without doubt in complete contrast to Indigenous worldviews where relationships are core to the existence and purpose of all peoples and entities (Martin, 2008; Wilson, 2008, 2016; Yunkaporta, 2019). Through an Indigenous relationality lens, all people and organisations that make up the academy are viewed as being related to one another and as such each one is responsible and accountable to Indigenous ECR development and career progression.

Like their non-Indigenous colleagues, Indigenous ECR's require clear guidelines, support, processes, and opportunities on which to plan and build their careers. In addition to the needs of their non-Indigenous colleagues, Indigenous ECRs also require that processes and potential opportunities recognise and are relevant to their cultural obligations. For this to occur it is necessary that additional Indigenous accountabilities are viewed and valued as critical to Indigenous relationality, rather than perceived as a burden or disadvantage. Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth (2020, p.2) state that "Relational

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<sup>5</sup> AIATSIS is an acronym for Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

<sup>6</sup> NTEU is an acronym for National Tertiary Education Industry Union

process' is at the heart of being—in Aboriginal worldviews an entity cannot exist unless it is in relation to something else.”

In its 2022-2025 *Indigenous Strategy*, Universities Australia (2022) indicated that the success of Indigenous students and staff in universities results in positive outcomes and benefits for all students, staff, and for Australia more broadly. What then becomes most critical from this perspective is the way in which Indigenous scholars are viewed, valued, and supported. It is essential that Indigenous peoples participate in, if not lead the development of Indigenous institutional policies and practices. As Holt & Morgan (2016, p.101) argue, “it is only when universities embrace relationships with Indigenous academia based on the principles of reciprocity, accountability, and respect, can these conversations move forward.”

To achieve optimum outcomes for Indigenous ECRs, there needs to be systematic and coordinated institutional approaches to developing career trajectories to ameliorate the effects of issues, such as underrepresentation, high teaching loads, cultural responsibilities, and racism that have been identified and examined in previous papers (Locke et al., 2021, 2022; Povey et al., 2022). Without these approaches, it is not just the individuals that miss out on career advancement, but universities continue to miss out on opportunities for enriching their curricula and research.

### Conclusion

In this paper, the employment of Indigenous relationality is positioned as essential to supporting and developing Indigenous ECRs in the academic community. An approach such as this would enable a shift from the deficit positioning of Indigenous ECRs towards genuine recognition and respect for Indigenous knowledges and worldviews. Data from this project shows that Indigenous ECRs are already providing opportunities and networks for Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and students in order to meet both their institutional and cultural responsibilities. Thus, it is crucial that these knowledges and skills are recognised, valued, and counted towards Indigenous ECRs track records.

The benefits to universities of a productive and successful Indigenous early career workforce are significant, and as such require careful and strategic planning. To be successful, such planning must be driven by Indigenous scholars with consultation and collaboration from Indigenous staff, students, Elders, and community members. In addition, Indigenous ECRs participating in this study have identified themselves, supervisors, managers, heads of faculty, senior executive, policy makers, and external bodies as responsible and accountable to the academic progression and success of Indigenous ECRs.

Critically, it is advocated that for institutions to succeed as global academies, a shared responsibility and accountability to understanding and implementing Indigenous values and worldviews at all levels of the higher education is paramount.

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