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Aboriginal social work academics: Failure to thrive due to having to fight to survive?

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Abstract

The Behrendt report (2012) highlighted the significant lack of representation of Aboriginal people in higher education. It called for a collaborative approach by governments, universities, and professional bodies to drive systemic changes. In the last decade, this has resulted in an increase of Aboriginal students, staff, and researchers. This article presents a qualitative research study in which Aboriginal social work academic participants described their experiences of curriculum changes, workload, and research in the academy. Implications for universities, and social work programs in particular, show where more is needed in the form of anti-racist action plans and follow-through with these to address failure to thrive due to having to fight to survive in the academy.

Key words: Aboriginal social work academics, Australia, systemic racism, anti-racist action

Implications

- Aboriginal social work academics are continuing to find academia to be socially and politically unsafe and unfairly competitive, and that universities are often unsupportive and untrustworthy workplaces.
- Non-Aboriginal social work academics need to increase commitment to, and actions regarding, anti-racist practice with their Aboriginal colleagues.

A university education is the foundation for most professional careers and alongside this is the central importance of academic staff training, support and opportunities to flourish in their careers. Research undertaken on the nature of academic work (Harman, 2000; Harman & Meek, 2007; Harman, 2003), shows an increasing influence of business models and logic where universities operate as commercial entities in a competitive marketplace. However, very little is known about the experiences and views of Aboriginal People who teach and carry out research in Australia's universities. Thus, it is unclear what is required to ensure workforce diversity and equality as well as quality of teaching and research, particularly in terms of critically reflective and culturally responsive practice.

Social Work and Academia

The impact of contemporary higher education policy on Australian social workers' professional practice has been subject to scholarly analysis (Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012; Gordon & Zuffery, 2013; Macias 2013; Morley & Dunstan, 2013). However, as Garret (2010, 2009) argues, there remains significant scope for examining the impact of neoliberal policies and managerial expectations in social work education. Blackmur (2015) and Welbourne (2011) argue that policies have emphasised market-based solutions, economic imperialism, competition, and quantitative

productivity measures. These policies have resulted in a tendency for management to encourage the development of approaches to social work education that neglect diversity in knowledge creation, and discourage ongoing critical analysis by academics (Ross, 2007). It remains important to understand how institutional dynamics impact on the development and implementation of social work education and research practices. An implication of not doing so could be collusion with systemic racism against Aboriginal people who study, teach and research in universities. Systemic racism has wide ranging adverse impact in societies which have colonialist economic and political structures. Systemic racism can be defined as patterns of inequality caused by the acceptance of white racial superiority in all aspects of an institution and broader society (hooks, 2000). Universities may reflect societal inequalities and perpetuate racism and other forms of discrimination if they are not proactive in providing diversity affirmative and supportive policies, plans and practices (Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

Aboriginal Academics

Aboriginal students account for 1.1% of higher degree by research (HDR) enrolments and 0.8% of completions (Australian Council of Learned Academies, ACOLA, 2016). Although the number of HDR enrolments has grown, Aboriginal HDR enrolments would need to double to achieve population parity with non-Aboriginal enrolments (ACOLA, 2016). While universities have promised to enhance the employment outcomes of their Aboriginal graduands (Universities Australia, 2017), the graduands are not progressing into academic careers (Anderson & McKinley, 2016).

There are approximately 430 Aboriginal academics in the 39 universities in Australia (Thunig & Jones, 2020). The under-representation of Aboriginal academic staff is widely acknowledged (Universities Australia, 2017) and Australian universities have been implored to make substantive changes to their employment strategies and adjust overall staff balances to reflect greater cultural diversity. Australian universities unanimously boast various cultural engagement strategies and offer public support and approval for attracting Aboriginal students across disciplines as well as developing the next generation of Aboriginal researchers (Universities Australia, 2018a). However, it remains the case that Aboriginal voices have been largely silenced within academic domains (Smith, 1999). Aboriginal academics such as Lester Rigney, Martin Nakata, Chelsea Watego, Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Amy Thunig (to name a few and see, for example, Moreton-Robinson, 2015) have written in broader discussions about racism and marginalisation in academia that continue to be faced. There is a paucity of literature about academia from a social work lens and none from the perspective of Aboriginal social work academics. The research addresses this gap and is unique in that it has been led, culturally governed (Author's Own), and authored by an Aboriginal social work academic.

Situating the Research

In 2019, the author was approached to take part in a collaborative study exploring the impact of the changing nature of academia for social workers within Australia. Given that Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing have recently been ratified and integrated as core social work curriculum components (Australian Association of Social Workers, AASW, 2020a), this research is of significance for Aboriginal peoples. The impact of the rapid changes and curriculum

transformations in the social work sector had not been previously articulated and Aboriginal social work academics are notably under-researched in the space. In agreement with the original Chief Investigator and with support from that research team, this author led an Aboriginal-focused extension of the project. As the project progressed, the Aboriginal participants communicated their desire that their thoughts, views, and perspectives should only be interpreted, written and published by an Aboriginal person. Due to the nature of academia and the fact that Aboriginal social work academics have been largely unheard in terms of their experiences of academia, the researcher decided to prioritise their voices separately to the non-Aboriginal peoples interviewed for the same project. Therefore, this article discusses Aboriginal social work academics' experiences and perspectives only. Ethics approval was sought and obtained from the University of Queensland and the University of the Sunshine Coast.

Research Question

The research question was: how does the changing nature of academic work in Australia influence and affect Aboriginal social work academics in areas such as curriculum, research and workloads? Working with Aboriginal peoples and communities is a necessary part of social work, and therefore Aboriginal content is a core part of social work education (AASW, 2020a). Hence, understanding how the nature of academia is experienced by Aboriginal social work academics and addressing any issues arising is vital for social work's ethical integrity as a profession.

Method

Participants

There is a small population of Aboriginal social work academics employed across the 30 universities offering social work programs within Australia. Therefore, data were modified to maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality. Participant and locality names were not stated, and transcripts were edited to remove any identifying particulars. Participants were selected through purposive sampling methods (Alston & Bowles, 2018) initially and were known to the researchers in a professional capacity. The participants were contacted via their professional emails. Snowball sampling techniques (Alston & Bowles, 2018) were also employed based on recommendations that emerged from initial interviews. During the interviews, participants were asked to reflect on their perceptions and experiences as an Aboriginal social work academic, including their views regarding changes in higher education.

When the project was advertised, some non-Aboriginal individuals indicated a willingness to participate. A decision was made to include their views in order to compare Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal experiences, given that there are many more non-Aboriginal people teaching in social work than Aboriginal academics. Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from across Australian states and territories. The author interviewed four non-Aboriginal and five Aboriginal social work academics. For the purposes of this article, only the five Aboriginal social work academics' responses will be discussed.

Research Design

The research project included qualitative, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to allow the researcher to conduct a dialogue with the participants, capturing a range of experiences and perspectives. Each interview was conducted in one hour. The project was informed by research yarning (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Bessarab and Ng'andu coined yarning as a research process:

“Yarning in a semi-structured interview is an informal and relaxed discussion through which both the researcher and participant journey together visiting places and topics of interest relevant to the research study. Yarning is a process that requires the researcher to develop and build a relationship that is accountable to Indigenous people participating in the research” (2010, p. 38). While the yarn is relaxed and interactive it is also purposeful to obtain information related to the research question with a defined beginning and end.

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed and analysed thematically and significant themes and commonalities of the narratives were identified. The analysis followed the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012) which involved the researchers familiarising themselves with the transcribed data and reading through the text and taking initial notes. The next step involved coding the data, highlighting sections of the text (phrases and sentences) and giving a code to describe the content (for example, workload). After this, patterns and themes began to emerge and were combined to form five broader themes. The author made sure the themes were useful and an accurate representation of the data by repeating steps one to five to make sure the results were accurate. A final defining and naming of themes occurred before the write up of the analysis.

Results

Aboriginal Research

Five Aboriginal academics took part in the research. Participants discussed the difficulties in defining and conceptualising aspects of being an Aboriginal social work academic. For example:

At times it is difficult to define what constitutes Indigenous research. Is it because any Indigenous person is leading it? It goes to me around questions of epistemology because if an Aboriginal person, say you are leading some research project but your research is not necessarily in an Indigenous community or centre, by the fact that you are leading it and producing knowledge - does that mean that it is an Indigenous research project, does it come from an Indigenous standpoint? I saw one led by a non-Indigenous person that said it was not Indigenous but all the respondents they were planning to interview were Indigenous. I said it is because they (the Indigenous participants) are giving their own intellectual property. (Participant 2)

For the first year, I think I was watching and observing and trying to work out how to not play the game but to work out what the game was in universities. It is almost like it is a game with rules and you must follow the rules to pass, go and collect \$200. So, for me I learned pretty quickly that I needed to be cautious, to watch and listen. To analyse everything that was going on around me to understand how what I thought was supposed to be a space where we shared knowledges with students who want to be social workers is a political game. (Participant 3)

Research Grants

All participants reported that their non-Aboriginal academic colleagues had suggested that research grants were far easier to obtain for Aboriginal academics because of a perceived lack of viable applicants, hinting at a lack of ability or expertise in the existing Aboriginal applicants. The proportion of Aboriginal researchers applying for and being awarded funding under the National Competitive Grants (across all schemes) is 0.8% of received proposals and 1.1% of funded research projects. These numbers seem low but are in line with the proportions recorded for the total Aboriginal academic workforce (Australian Research Council, ARC, 2018). “I’m competing against level D and E professors who may have had up to four ARCs (Australian Research Council

Grants) compared to my none. The pool might be smaller, but the talent is fierce and deadly”, (Participant 5).

Some participants expressed that the Aboriginal space has previously been one of the easiest areas to get research grants and to publish articles because of the depth of work required within the space. One participant stated that: “There appears to be a lack of organised mentoring within universities to allow newer academics to make their mark”, (Participant 3).

Participants noted a distinct lack of formal mentoring for grant writing available for Aboriginal academics, particularly for junior staff. A participant who would be regarded as a senior social work academic reported being inundated with requests for project input and mentoring, which could be physically and emotionally exhausting. Participants reported an inability to identify opportunities to build professional capacity in terms of credentials and experience. Instead, there is a perception that Aboriginal academics are invited onto grants “because people need a black face in the application” (Participant 2). Although Aboriginal people are attaining Chief Investigator and Lead Investigator roles in collaborative research projects (ARC, 2020) there is still little material evidence that there has been any significant impact of university research for Aboriginal peoples and communities across the key indicators (Universities Australia, 2018b). “The biggest challenge for Aboriginal academics in the grant space is the demand to prove a level of disadvantage while remaining strengths based. A competitive application requires a deficit discourse, which continues the cycle of negative stereotypes and inequality”, (Participant 2). And furthermore:

We have to create ourselves as the problem to fix. Once we become the problem it closes the door on being able to walk away from being oppressed and not needing help. Social work is all about fixing and helping and so that conversation is often about how we're going to fix this group? (Participant 4)

Aboriginal Research Ethics

A participant was concerned that human research ethics committees can sometimes be overzealous in their assessment of risks and benefits. The participant felt that while the ethics process was potentially valuable, in their experience high-quality proposals had been blocked. They felt this was because of ethics committees' inhibitive or prohibitive stances with no obvious way in which these decisions can be challenged. All participants expressed that there needed to be a better balance struck between safe, respectful, responsible research, and current labyrinthine ethics processes which sometimes unfairly reject a proposal. Another concern raised by some participants was the difficulty to follow-up to discover if the research has been carried out according to ethical standards. Instead, universities rely upon the receipt of complaints from participants or community members. This system is flawed as these complaints are highly unlikely to be lodged, largely because Aboriginal communities are unfamiliar with research processes, protocols, and practices.

I have seen in the past with a number of communities I know people were saying “well they did something here and they did something there, but we never saw them again”, so the person did not come back and disseminate. There is currently nothing in place to deal with this. (Participant 2)

There have been some significant commitments made by universities aimed at developing genuine pathways for research transparency and community understanding (Universities Australia, 2020). At present, there are resources available that researchers can offer to the community that identify whether the research they are participating in is in their best interests. One of the participants noted these documents are not easily accessible, and the onus is on the researcher to seek them out. Another participant commented that the resources are “very wordy” and this can be an issue when the reader's first language is not English.

Participants reported being regularly approached to be involved in studies or to be on governance committees. In response to these requests, participants raised that they had learned to ask what the expectations would be for their participation. They reported that the responses overwhelmingly included an expectation that the participants would provide the relevant contact details of pertinent community members and facilitate their introductions. Several participants pointed out that this role can be better described as being “a community conduit”, and this is often not a role participants are prepared to undertake.

Social Work Curriculum Development

Participants expressed concern about social work curriculum embedding Aboriginal worldviews inadequately, either intermittently throughout the social work program or in one isolated subject or designated week within a subject and had also found Aboriginal content placed in inappropriate topics (such as multiculturalism or cultural diversity components of subjects).

Certainly, around Indigenisation of the curriculum, we did take hold of that and say no, no, no, no because there was great enthusiasm and efforts to put in every bad idea that had ever been thought of, there was a complete lack of understanding. Indigenising the curriculum, they thought, was about having someone come and talk about their culture. We have to say no very, very firmly that this is a scholarly exercise that is about Indigenous knowledges being embedded into the different curriculum streams [...]. We are constantly battling away to stop the university trying to force mainstream models onto us despite all the evidence that they don't work. (Participant 3)

It's a part of the epistemology of ignorance, they fail to learn because it suits them not to learn. It's in their interest to sort of say we will get X to do the Aboriginal bit. (Participant 1)

Who is writing the content, who is delivering the content, who is responsible and accountable for the content and who is evaluating it, who is reviewing it?
(Participant 2)

Academic Workloads

From the interviews it was apparent that an academic workload can vary significantly according to institution, discipline, and team circumstances. Academic workloads typically require a heavy emphasis on teaching. This can equate to large numbers of students, tutorials, and marking. Each of these components impact an academic's ability to engage with research.

I mean the tutorial classes seem to get bigger each year. It's like the cap is at 25 and then, let's make it 30 this semester because we've got a bigger enrolment group. And then let's take it to 35 because the room has that capacity. (Participant 5)

There are so many people around me in academia that feel that they have expertise. And will frame themselves as an expert in a particular area. Whereas when people ask me what my area of expertise is I say I am not an expert in anything but my life.
(Participant 3)

So many white academics think me, me, me. Whereas we don't think that. We think of us. And community, and not just the community that is physically walking as human bodies on country right now, but what is going to come to pass into our next stage, and I feel like that future mentality for us is what really makes us unique and strong. (Participant 4)

According to the National Tertiary Education Union (Miller, 2020), current academic workload models are an issue of contention. Several participants reported that the assigned academic workload was unrealistic and inappropriate in content due to its narrow, Eurocentric focus which failed to consider cultural components such as reciprocity and community relationship building. Further, participants noted that they often do additional work, such as community consultation, that they

feel is not understood or valued by their academic colleagues. Anything Indigenous - be[comes] the mandate of the Aboriginal person. Somehow the responsibility and pressure are all placed on the Aboriginal person to try to get a lot of these values and attitudes to shift. (Participant 2)

Additionally, reports expressed that universities assume that fewer student numbers indicate less work, failing to understand the additional cultural and education supports that may be needed for Aboriginal students. Relatedly, participants reported confusion as to who determines and allocates academic workloads. Some said that they were allocated duties without the authority, basis, or ample resources to complete them effectively. All participants reported working many more hours than they were actually paid for. They also felt that some expectations from the university were increasingly difficult to meet. For example:

Marking is the best example of it. There was an assessment that I marked recently, in a course that I taught for the first time. 500-word assessment that you are expected to mark in 2-5 minutes. Those students have put in effort. I want to do my work well and properly. The majority for those 500-word assessments I was spending 20 minutes. (Participant 4)

Many times, more teaching or more work is presented as a “good opportunity”:

Unfortunately we don't always have our privilege to pick and choose what fight we want to stand for or what we do and don't want to do [...] my work isn't synonymous with the institution but part of having to do that work actually means that I have to be in a relationship with that institution. (Participant 1)

Colleagues and Experiences

Several Aboriginal social work academics interviewed felt that non-Aboriginal people “learning” in the Aboriginal space were “listening to respond”. Participants noted that prior to entering

academia, they naively expected the social workspace to be committed to core social work ethics and values such as the tenets of human rights, upholding social justice, and respect for all persons (AASW, 2020b). Instead, participants reported that, at times, social work academics were racist and exclusionary. Participants spoke about being a single Aboriginal academic on a team, within a discipline or even at the broader faculty level meant that individuals felt it became difficult to have control and influence and that many non-Aboriginal academics who were hostile to change were allowed to be unaccountable for their actions, their content, and teaching.

For a lot of people they think if you go and do a half day or a full day cultural competency workshop, you go in and stroke the possum skin, watch an Aboriginal man build a fire with sticks and grass and you hear a bit of language, you can walk out, all of a sudden you are competent. Because English is a binary language. So, people go into these things thinking well obviously I am incompetent and walk out thinking they are competent. (Participant 3)

This is where social work broadly as a profession but also specifically within the academic space is not on the ball. Constantly you see social work courses scrambling to find an Indigenous person to teach Aboriginal people in social work. And that is a problem anyway, one - you've got this idea that you only need Indigenous academics for one subject not to inform and contribute to the whole program, again that diversity tack on. And then secondly where is the support for our Indigenous students and workers out there? Where is the support to get them into academia and to build like a community? (Participant 4)

Participants spoke about the push for Aboriginal social work academics to be solely responsible for managing cultural content. Participants stated this placed an onerous burden on many Aboriginal academics and their respective communities. They claimed that their universities lacked any progressive vision or formal directives about developing allyship and shared responsibility for

curriculum and research initiatives. The participants reflected that there is little continuing professional development undertaken by social work academics to ensure they are and remain critically reflective, culturally responsive educators and researchers.

One other concerning but similar story expressed by the participants was that each felt they had in some way had their ideas culturally appropriated. There were several clear examples of non-Aboriginal individuals appropriating journal publications, funding, and curriculum development ideas without an offer of co-authorship or acknowledgement. This made each participant more cautious and less trusting of other social work academics: “It is really hard working in a big institute, one that you feel really doesn't value the core of what you are about and who you are”, (Participant 2).

Despite episodes of burnout, emotional stress and mental and physical exhaustion, participants considered that they were resilient as individuals and harnessed strength from being a cohort. All participants expressed strong feelings concerning the pressure and responsibility of leaving a legacy to ensure other Aboriginal social work academics and students had access to mentoring and opportunities. Many felt “called” to the work and this gave them an inner strength and a determination to succeed. One participant spoke about crippling feelings of anxiety and depression that almost stopped them from continuing with their academic career. However, others spoke about self-care and awareness, especially in avoiding issues that may cause personal harm. An example of this was avoidance of certain academics who regularly made inappropriate racist remarks: “You work yourself into the ground because you are trying to make it a better place for everybody but unfortunately it comes at a huge cost”, (Participant 1).

Participants noted that although universities seemed to have taken some progressive steps with respect to the Aboriginal space (such as the development of Reconciliation Action Plans or Aboriginal employment goals), some have also cut valuable funding or staffing numbers, thereby sabotaging the effectiveness of these actions: “Achieving sustainability seems to be an issue. Economic rationalism plays a part. It is a numbers game”, (Participant 1).

All participants reported that they had started working in academia with a certain naivety about what was expected of social work staff. Participants explained that social work studies should promote social justice, equity, inclusion, and change. Instead, they had to balance conflicting personal, cultural, and professional ethics and often, this was exhausting.

Quite often when you demonstrate a form of leadership you then can get positioned as being a killjoy. Why don't they shut the **** up; I'm sick of hearing that ****. If I was to say anything about that then I am being unreasonable, then maybe it's beyond me, maybe it's too much, maybe I should just do something else.
(Participant 2)

One of the participants stated that they felt: “Aboriginal academics have specialised unique cultural knowledge and perhaps deserve the right to be paid at a higher bracket, particularly when teaching in the Aboriginal space”, (Participant 3).

Several participants suggested their social work colleagues need to become more proactive in supporting their expertise and nominating them for appropriate awards and supporting them in promotion application procedures. Finally, participants spoke about sometimes being described as troublesome, passionate, angry, and lazy. Each had a story to tell about this inaccurate and insulting stereotyping, for example:

So most definitely people would say that I was passionate if they were being polite, and people would say that I was difficult if they weren't being polite. And I can be difficult, but I have to work at it. They don't realise that being difficult actually takes a huge emotional toll because you have to commit to conflict and really decide where you stand, what you are going to stand on, how you are going to deal with resistance and how you are going to work it through. It is quite exhausting and so they think it's part of you, being a difficult person but having to be in this hostile landscape where people can be really quite offensive on the obvious occasions and you have to pull up the nice folks that were offensive who didn't mean to be offensive and they get all upset, and sort of say I am unhappy that you have taken that line. (Participant 5)

At the level of supporting Aboriginal social work academics there was a need expressed for supervisors and managers who were culturally responsive. This meant supervisors who were supportive, effective, available, and promoted career guidance that progressed career development. Such supervision would also assist in the monitoring of workloads and expectations. This would ensure that Aboriginal social work academics were supported to engage in research and not become trapped in teaching-only positions.

Discussion

The impact of neoliberalism in the academy results in competitive individualism, which is an anathema to the collegiality and solidarity needed to promote and foster practices of inclusion, reciprocity and social justice. The competitive and unequal relations of power mean that status, recognition and career opportunities are distributed unevenly. The impacts of neoliberalism and the pressures and demands of university life are widespread and general, but as this research demonstrates, the felt experience on Aboriginal academics has a particularity that coalesces with institutional racism and historical injustices. Hence, the participants in this research were clear that

universities needed to actively promote and implement anti-racist; inclusive and affirmative cultural action plans and the current research suggests some priority areas. They noted that supporting initiatives that attract and retain Aboriginal social work academics requires more than mere rhetoric and the seemingly endless procession of strategic plans and engagement agendas (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020). Participants proposed that Universities needed to ensure career pathways were visible with clear career progression opportunities for all Aboriginal academic staff as well including initiatives to better position the university as an attractive career option. Importantly, participants identified that cultural obligations and community networking was necessary and central to workload expectations, where time would be allocated to ensure work was undertaken to develop and maintain Aboriginal community connectedness. Additionally, the participants felt that there was a gap in research demonstrating the impact of barriers or prohibitions identified for Aboriginal students and HDR candidates to allow the development of effective strategies to support the enrolment and engagement of Aboriginal students.

These interviews highlighted participants' views that the unclear nature of university ethics processes and the lack of recognition of the need for continuous community consultation and feedback process inhibited the building of robust, rigorous, Aboriginal led and controlled research. A further issue arising from the interviews was that a sense of lacking community safety arose from the absence of effective mechanisms for input and critique for non-Aboriginal research that intends to use community data. This highlighted the need for non-Aboriginal academics to have opportunities for capacity building so that they fully understand whether the research they were anticipating conducting was, in fact, ethical. Bennett (2019, 2019a)) has argued, processes such as participation, collaboration, confidentiality, and research rigor must be undertaken and require

more in-depth discussions and the development of collaborative action plans with both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal academics .

These interviewees supported the view that Universities need to ensure that any curriculum developed embeds Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and being (Bessarab, 2014) appropriately in subjects, with appropriate consultation with Aboriginal academics, communities, and allies. This is further supported by the AASW (2020a) to meet national standardisation of social work programs within Australia. To ensure that social work students develop critical reflective practices and cultural responsiveness skills to utilize in the field, professional development that is inclusive and anti-racist is required for all university staff. Research or academic teams need to include more than one Aboriginal academic or ally within the university setting to ensure collaboration and equity, and ultimately adhering to upholding the voices of Aboriginal academics and communities.

A participant explained this issue:

The pace of change is not fast enough by any means, and we as Aboriginal [social work] academics in the space need to be far more bolshy and far more demanding. We are in a space where we can risk their wrath because I think that there is enough of us, we are now publishing that we can actually risk upsetting them [...] those of us that are secure in our employment need to be brave and stand up and just call it out because that way the other people can be reasonable and we can be the voice of demand and change can happen at a faster pace because nothing changes out of anybody's generosity and good[will]. [...] it's always forced change where the price of not changing is higher than the pricing of changing. (Participant 3)

Limitations

It was not possible to interview every Aboriginal social work academic currently working within Australian universities. Therefore, the research represents the views of some and not the whole

Aboriginal social work academic population in Australia. Thus, it is not claiming to be a representative cohort and is limited in diversity of views to participants who agreed to the larger research project. However, this does not absolve universities from taking the diversity of Aboriginal academics' voices seriously until more research is undertaken.

Conclusion

The study interviewed five Aboriginal social work academics, who were recruited through professional networks as part of a larger research project. Their experiences and views have contributed to an understanding of the university setting in which Australian Aboriginal social work academics are employed. The research found that it is necessary to support the development of an anti-racist action plan and implement it in an equal partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics, students and communities. This can foster a culturally responsive and critically reflective work environment that will support the thriving of current and future generations of Aboriginal social work students and academics. Further research and discussion is needed to trial the suggested ideas and to consider additional steps or strategies that could support the changes away from experiences of fighting to survive due to unaddressed systemic racism. Whilst these ideas are far from exhaustive, they do provide an immediate action strategy to directly improve the areas of most concern identified by the research participants.

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