

# Incorporating and understanding different ways of knowing in the education of Indigenous students



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Professor Jill Milroy is a Palyku woman whose country is in the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

Professor Milroy is Dean of the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia, which under her leadership has been highly successful in developing preparatory and support programs for Indigenous students in professional degrees, including Law and Medicine. The success of these programs has been recognised by two national teaching excellence awards.

Professor Milroy taught Aboriginal history for 15 years and has significant expertise in Indigenous curriculum development across a range of disciplines, including health, landscape design, education and law. She is currently working on a project to design Indigenous curriculum in Engineering. The key focus of her research is in Aboriginal story systems and she creates and tells stories with her mother Gladys Milroy, a Palyku Elder. The basis of their work is the rights of Aboriginal children to be born into stories. Professor Milroy's more than 20 years' experience in Indigenous higher education has included serving on a number of national advisory bodies, committees and reviews. She has been a strong advocate within the national higher education arena for the formal recognition and resourcing of Indigenous knowledge systems. In 2011 she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in recognition of her services to Indigenous education.

## **Abstract**

This presentation considers what Indigenous students need in order to achieve their full potential within Australia's education system. The presentation draws on the success of programs for young Indigenous people and school leavers that enable them to complete university, including elite professional degrees, despite limited success or even failure in secondary schooling. If it can be turned around at this level, why can't it be done earlier? Equity in educational achievement, after all, is not just about reaching the same end point, but about whether the journey there is also equitable and not unfairly prolonged. If we all agree western education is necessary, and if we could achieve this, the next question is, will western educational success be enough for Indigenous students? Is this Indigenous students' full potential and if so, will these 'successful' Indigenous students be enough to sustain whole communities? This of course is the ultimate aim of education systems. This presentation therefore considers how Indigenous people might define 'full potential' differently for Indigenous students and this includes not just education, but also future employment. From an Indigenous point of view Australia has two competing knowledge systems, only one of which is officially acknowledged, valued and resourced to succeed within Australia's education sector. Indigenous ways of knowing are integral to Indigenous student success *and* to cultural continuity for Indigenous communities, yet scant resources are allocated to sustain them. Without a sectoral and conceptual shift in relation to Indigenous knowledge systems, we are unlikely to achieve sufficient change in Indigenous students' schooling outcomes for a large enough cohort of Indigenous students over a long enough

period of time to tip the balance for Indigenous communities as a whole.

## **Introduction**

The disparity in educational achievement of Indigenous students is clearly evident in state, national and international assessments. Put simply, the Australian education system continues to fail Indigenous students, despite decades of educational research and the combined efforts of dedicated Indigenous and non-Indigenous people within and outside of the education sector. While there are many and complex issues that may contribute to this, looking back from an Indigenous higher education perspective, the critical factor I see is the significant and sustained undervaluing of Indigenous students, both in terms of their capacity and their aspirations – what they can learn and what they want to learn from Australia's education system. This is compounded by the failure of the education system at all levels to understand and value Indigenous knowledge as a complete and complex knowledge system or to recognise that Indigenous people, as holders and practitioners of knowledge are expert educators. Neither of these are new ideas, but the way in which they have been understood, articulated and addressed is problematic. Only by addressing both issues simultaneously can we achieve sustained change, and this hinges on non-Indigenous Australians being willing to critically examine their own knowledge and education system.

*A note in relation to terminology, the community in Western Australia, generally prefers to use 'Aboriginal' rather than 'Indigenous' and Education Department reports use follow this. I have used both 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' depending on the context.*

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## Aboriginal students in Western Australia

In Western Australia, despite improvements, the achievement of Aboriginal students in secondary school remains unacceptably low. While there is an intense focus on retention as the key building block, there has not been as strong a focus on achievement until relatively recently, particularly in relation to educational outcomes in Years 10–12.

The Education Department Annual Report 2009–2010 makes grim bedside reading in relation to Aboriginal students in government schools in Western Australia. If we consider the paired indicators of retention and 'success':

- The apparent retention rate for Aboriginal students from Year 8–12 in Western Australian government schools in 2009, though significantly improved, was still only 37.5% compared to 66% for non-Indigenous students.
- For Aboriginal students who made it to Year 12, less than half met the requirements for a Year 12 certificate; the majority didn't actually graduate. This again was an improvement on 2008.
- If we take 'success' one step further and look at the implications for higher education, only 7% of Aboriginal secondary graduates achieved a Tertiary Entrance Rank high enough for university entry, just 17 Aboriginal students.

I am not intending to be overly critical of the Education Department or of government schools, who cater to the overwhelming majority of Aboriginal students in Western Australia. The data for Aboriginal students in independent private schools aren't readily available for comparison but anecdotally, they don't appear to be substantially better. However, this isn't a blame game; it is

an intensely perplexing and despairing situation for us all, for schools, educators and Aboriginal communities. We must collectively find urgent and creative solutions, and while the task is immense, there are things that Aboriginal people know we can do, but they don't seem to be taken up.

### Expectations and aspirations

I am speaking from more than 20 years engagement in higher education providing programs for young Indigenous students. More than 60% of Indigenous students at the University of Western Australia (UWA) are aged 21 years or under. This is different to most Australian universities, where the age demographic is reversed and a majority of Indigenous students are mature age. While many of the Indigenous students have completed Year 12, not all have achieved secondary graduation or results in Tertiary Entrance Exams that are sufficient for university entry or for the course they want. Overall 70% of Indigenous students will use some form of special entry to enter UWA and for courses such as Medicine and Law this rises to 80%.

To achieve this result, UWA offers a comprehensive set of secondary outreach, transition and pathways for Aboriginal secondary students that start in Year 8 and go through to Year 12. The programs may focus on particular professions (e.g. Medicine), year cohorts (e.g. Year 9 Science and Engineering) or skills (e.g. TEE revision). Programs have strong regional student engagement, generally have residential components and most students attend more than one. In fact, once one member in a family attends a program, younger siblings often follow. The programs are individually and collectively designed to raise aspirations to university, but also give students some of the tools they need to

choose the right subjects and achieve at a higher level. A key component of raising Aboriginal student expectations is meeting UWA's young Aboriginal students in all fields of study, who often simply say, 'hey I did it, so can you'.

While there are multiple issues that impact on outcomes for Aboriginal students, the comment most often made by Aboriginal secondary students is that they never imagined they could go to university let alone become a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer; and that schools rarely told them they could either. In fact Indigenous students will often say they are discouraged from university and 'given the TAFE booklet'. Schools often appear to have low expectations of Aboriginal students and this reinforces lower student aspirations and ultimately lower achievement. Unfortunately, when we look at the VET in schools in relation to Aboriginal students this appears to be the case and VET participation is increasing. Aboriginal students are already twice as likely to participate in VET in schools as other students and less likely to combine it with TEE study. This is not intended as a criticism of VET in schools – it has an important role. However, we do need to know if the increase in VET in schools is about bringing low-achieving Aboriginal students up or actually taking the Aboriginal students out of the higher end?

### Resourcing Indigenous knowledge and education systems

In order to still be here and recognised as the oldest living culture in the world, it must be understood that Aboriginal peoples had and *need to continue to have* a complete knowledge system and a successful way of transmitting this knowledge through an education system, in order to ensure not just survival but a rich and sustaining life.

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We always had high expectations and high outcomes from our knowledge systems.

It is asserted that educational success for Aboriginal students is about high achievement in western education systems while maintaining Aboriginal identity and cultural connection. The difficulty with this is that the two aims have never really coincided and most often they actually pull against each other. The other difficulty is that while we recognise the systems and infrastructure in which western success is to be achieved (the 'collective' of Australian state and territory education systems) it is not clear what the plan is and where the infrastructure is for Aboriginal knowledge systems to be able to provide the same level of education. The expectation appears to be that it is something that Aboriginal families and communities can deliver in their spare time, holiday, weekends, etc.

This is coupled with the underlying assumption that Aboriginal knowledge systems only benefit Aboriginal people and that therefore we are the only ones who need to protect and maintain them. However, Aboriginal people no longer have the resources to protect, sustain and continue to develop their knowledge systems. All knowledge systems and the education systems that flow from them need protecting, nurturing and 'resourcing' to continue to thrive and continue to develop. It is becoming increasingly difficult for Aboriginal peoples and communities to protect their knowledge systems in face of the relentless onslaught from mining and development.

While perhaps not enough in relation to the size of the task, massive resources have been poured in Indigenous education in western systems. Perhaps if a comparable amount was also allocated to Aboriginal knowledge systems, we may not be in the predicament we are today. We also

might have non-Indigenous Australians recognising that Aboriginal knowledge systems are not just for Aboriginal students but the fundamental way in which all children learn to know their country.

### **Summary**

Aboriginal parents have a right to have their children educated and Aboriginal children have a right to have their parents educated. This makes a *whole* community and a community *whole*.

### **References**

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