

Chapter 1

Indigenous Peoples and Higher Degrees by Research in Higher Education



Abstract This chapter provides an overview of the research conducted about the needs and experiences of Indigenous higher degree by research (HDR) students. We conducted multiple studies (six datasets in total) that included evaluation forms from capacity-building workshops, group discussions, written responses, online surveys to Indigenous HDR students ($n = 114$) and supervisors of Indigenous HDR students ($n = 33$) focusing on their needs and experiences and an evaluation survey of a national program. Of the six datasets, all but one are from Indigenous HDR students. All of these sources of data collected have helped to inform this book. We argue that Indigenous peoples are not the problem that need ‘fixing’ to increase HDR completions rates; rather, the system needs addressing to better support Indigenous HDR students. This book is written to privilege the voices of the Indigenous HDR students who were involved in this research. Through the chapters, we will undo and/or dispel some misunderstandings that continue to persist in higher education institutions about what Indigenous HDR students need to succeed in the academy. We challenge these assumptions using the insights shared by Indigenous HDR students who told us about their needs and experiences in higher education. This chapter provides the background, states the aims of the book and the research question guiding this study and provides an overview of each chapter in this book. We have written this book for anyone interested in successful pathways for Indigenous HDR students.

Keywords Indigenous · Higher education · Success · Support · NIRAKN · Capacity building

1.1 Background

The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (hereafter referred to as Indigenous peoples) enrolling in higher degree by research (HDR) has increased over the last decade. Unfortunately, the completion rates of Indigenous HDRs have remained relatively low (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2020). A range of factors continue to affect the retention and completion rates of Indigenous HDR students, including access to high-quality research supervision (Behrendt et al., 2012; Raciti et al., 2018;

Schofield et al., 2013; Trudgett, 2013, 2014), racism, discrimination and low socio-economic status (Hutchings et al., 2018, 2019; Schofield et al., 2013). Similar retention and completion rates issues affecting Indigenous HDR students are occurring in other countries, including Canada (Childs et al., 2016) and New Zealand (Schofield et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2011). One reason for low completion rates by Indigenous HDR students relates to insufficient Indigenous methodological and cultural knowledge from their supervisors (Grant & McKinley, 2011). As such, Hutchings et al. (2019) identified supervisor knowledge and training as a success factor for Indigenous peoples in higher education.

Quality supervision is key to Indigenous HDR students' success and a primary concern of most HDR students (Trudgett, 2011). Many studies have identified contributing factors to 'quality' supervision of Indigenous HDR students (Laycock et al., 2009; Pihama et al., 2019; Schofield et al., 2013; Trudgett, 2011, 2013, 2014). These include supervisors' mentoring expertise, availability and respect for students and readiness to provide students with culturally specific support, as well as compatibility within the supervisory team. The need for quality cross-cultural supervision due to insufficient experienced Indigenous supervisors was also identified (Wilson et al., 2017). While our research shares some parallels with these studies, it provides insight from Indigenous HDR students on supervision practices in an Australian context and may be of relevance for other countries.

Previous studies have relied primarily on quantitative data, which may limit the depth of responses. We report on the findings from our mostly qualitative studies but include three surveys that collected quantitative demographic information with open-ended responses that were conducted with Indigenous HDR students from different academic disciplines who were enrolled in higher education institutions across Australia and/or were supervisors of Indigenous HDR students. In total, six types of data were collected and analysed for this research, as shown in Table 1.1.

We will now discuss the above datasets in more detail and point to the chapters that will use this data. In Chap. 3, datasets 1 and 2 are used when discussing the capacity-building workshops run by the National Indigenous Research and Knowledge Network (NIRAKN). Dataset 1 included all of the NIRAKN capacity-building workshops that took place in 2018, which included one 5-day beginners capacity-building workshop, 1 two-day Indigenous research methodology master class, 1 one-day critical writing workshop facilitated by the National State Hub Leader and Director of NIRAKN, Professor Peter Anderson and Dr. Levon Blue (NIRAKN coordinator). Dr. David Singh and Distinguished Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson also facilitated the 5-day Beginners Capacity Building Workshop. In 2018, a one-day workshop that covered a bit of everything was presented by all of the State Hub Leaders of NIRAKN and Distinguished Professor Moreton-Robinson. Dataset 2 was administered online and consisted of an online survey seeking the views of past NIRAKN participants about the capacity-building workshops that were offered. The feedback received was in the form of qualitative responses.

Chapter 4 explores the role of agency in a higher education context. The datasets used to inform this chapter included datasets 3, 4, 5 and 6, which included written evaluation forms, online surveys and written responses. Chapter 5 focuses on the

Table 1.1 Datasets from 2018 to 2021

Dataset number	Type (written evaluation form, group discussion, written response and/or online survey)	Year collected	What it is and who it includes	Number of participants	Referred to in text as
1	Written evaluation form (qualitative)	2018	NIRAKN workshop evaluations (Indigenous HDR students)	65	WEF_IndigenousHDR#
2	Online survey (qualitative with quantitative demographic information)	2021	NIRAKN evaluation (former Indigenous HDR students)	13	OLS1_IndigenousHDR#
3	Group discussion (qualitative)	2018	Discussion about needs and experiences of Indigenous HDRs (Indigenous HDR students)	34	GD_IndigenousHDR
4	Individual written responses (qualitative)	2018	Written responses about needs and experiences of Indigenous HDR students (Indigenous HDR students)	34 ^a	IWR_IndigenousHDR#
5	Online survey (qualitative and quantitative demographic information)	2020	Survey about the needs and experiences of Indigenous HDR students (Indigenous HDR students)	32	OLS2_IndigenousHDR#
6	Online survey (qualitative and quantitative demographic information)	2020	Survey about the needs and experiences of Indigenous HDR students (supervisors and Indigenous HDR students)	33	OLS3_Supervisor#
Total participants				147	

^aThe same participants who completed the group discussion also provided a written response to additional questions. We only counted these participants once despite it being two different sets of data

needs and experiences of Indigenous HDR students. Datasets 3, 4 and 5 were used to inform this chapter, including audio-recorded group discussions, written responses to questions and an online survey. Chapter 6 focuses on the views of supervisors of Indigenous HDR students (dataset 6); however, datasets 3 and 4 are also used to compare and contrast what Indigenous HDR students are also reporting about these themes. Chapter 7 is the last chapter before our recommendations, in which datasets 3, 4, 5 and 6 are used to inform its findings. This chapter focuses on identifying some commonly held myths about Indigenous HDR students and challenging the myths with insights from Indigenous HDR students who report what they ‘actually’ need for success. Chapter 8 builds on previous recommendations that were informed by datasets 3 and 4 by analysing and reporting on findings from dataset 5.

In Chaps. 3–7, we identify the datasets used and describe the data analysis process used to thematically analyse and identify the needs and experiences of both Indigenous HDR students and supervisors of Indigenous HDR students. Throughout these chapters, we reveal disparities between HDR students’ expectations (wants) and their actual needs and how these are fulfilled and/or unfulfilled by their supervisory team. We found there was a disconnect between the students’ understanding of the supervisory process as opposed to the institutional requirements of supervision and that there were commonly held beliefs about Indigenous HDR students, such as the beliefs that they need to be researching Indigenous issues, that they need to be supervised by Indigenous supervisors and that they need to use Indigenous research methodologies. We unpack these assumptions or ‘myths’ and share what Indigenous HDRs report they need to experience success in higher education.

Respectful relationships, discipline knowledge from their supervisors and opportunities to build their CV during candidature were identified as key factors in a successful HDR experience. We also share the experiences from supervisors of Indigenous HDR students and report what further opportunities exist to enhance the higher education experiences of Indigenous HDR students. We then identify how successful relationships between Indigenous HDR students and their supervisors may be fostered.

Last, despite focusing on Indigenous HDR students in an Australian higher education context, this book may be a valuable resource for Indigenous peoples wishing to pursue higher education in countries with Indigenous populations, as well as for supervisors of HDR students in those countries.

1.2 Aims of This Book and Research Questions

The main aim of this book is to privilege the voices of Indigenous HDR students who have shared their needs and experiences in academia. From the insights shared, we aim to identify successful pathways in higher education institutions as informed by Indigenous HDR students. Our research is informed by datasets 1 through 6, which also involved some of the authors’ experiences in facilitating NIRAKN capacity-building workshops (Professor Peter Anderson and Dr. Levon Blue) and one author

(Melanie Saward) who participated in NIRAKN workshops during her HDR. Based on our experience, we can report that assumptions about what Indigenous HDR students need are often viewed as homogenous. For instance, we were told by non-Indigenous academics that Indigenous HDR students need to use Indigenous research methodologies when conducting research; or that Indigenous HDR students need to be supervised by Indigenous academics rather than an academic with relevant discipline expertise. We were also informed that Indigenous HDR students are assumed to focus on a research topic related to Indigenous issues. We wonder how these three assumptions about Indigenous HDR students impact their ‘choice’ and ‘success’ in academia. Choice discourses reinforce hegemonic power structures by pathologising individuals, by ignoring the role of power and social structures (Pinto & Coulson, 2011). So, although we understand the dangers of assuming individuals have ‘choice’ beyond the power and social structures within higher education for Indigenous HDR students, their perceived ‘choice’ may be further limited by assumptions made about what they *ought* to be doing. By ‘success’, what this means to Indigenous HDR students likely might not be the same thing (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2019), but for the purposes of this book, ‘success’ is connected to completion of the research degree. Although we did not ask Indigenous HDR students what ‘success’ means in a higher education context, throughout this book, we share insights from Indigenous HDR students that were collected from 2018 to 2021 (as shown in Table 1.1—datasets 1–6).

As such, the *research questions* guiding this book are:

- (1) How are Indigenous HDR students enabled to succeed?
- (2) What are the experiences and needs of Indigenous HDR students?
- (3) What additional support is required to ensure Indigenous HDR students complete their research degrees?
- (4) What professional development is required for supervisors of Indigenous HDR students to enable students to complete their HDR degrees?

We sought to understand from Indigenous HDR students what they believe is needed to succeed instead of what can be seen as assumptions by the academy. We obtained these insights after delivering capacity-building workshops, via group discussions, written responses and/or online surveys. We also asked supervisors of Indigenous HDR students ($n = 34$) for insights about what they believe is needed when supervising an Indigenous HDR candidate through to completion. However, the majority of responses ($n = 147$) came from Indigenous HDR students. Next, we provide an overview of this book by providing an overview of each of the eight chapters.

1.3 Overview of This Book

This book contains eight chapters, including this introductory chapter, which provides an overview of the context of the research and the data we collected. This introductory

chapter will set the scene by identifying what is happening in the higher education space for Indigenous HDR students, what capacity building we have been involved in and where more work is needed based on the findings from our research.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of barriers and supports relating to Indigenous HDR students by exploring the literature about Australian higher education institutions and international higher education institutions. The number of Indigenous HDR students has increased steadily over the past decade. Support for Indigenous students from the Australian government, universities and Indigenous Support Units has been documented in Australian higher education. Unfortunately, a range of barriers continue to hinder Indigenous HDR students' completion of their degrees in their research journey. This chapter provides a literature review of those barriers, which include the lack of academic skill sets and research skills to pursue a research degree program, lack of social and academic support for Indigenous HDR students, the student-supervisor relationship issues and challenges relating to health, family and community responsibilities. Simultaneously, our review identified current strategies and initiatives to retain Indigenous HDR students in their research degree programs and to support them to completion, highlighting the roles of the Indigenous Postgraduate Support Officer and NIRAKN. This review, we suggest, should move further to analyse the effectiveness of current strategies and initiatives provided for Indigenous HDR students in detail to inform Indigenous students of the available support resources and how to access to these resources.

In Chap. 3, we describe the capacity-building workshops that Indigenous HDR students have had an opportunity to participate in via NIRAKN. The workshops covered basic information about completing a research degree, including how to navigate academia, how to read and write critically and an introduction to Indigenous research methodologies. In this chapter, an overview of what NIRAKN set out to achieve and what has been accomplished is discussed. Evaluation forms completed by Indigenous HDR students who attended capacity-building workshops were analysed to understand what students found to be beneficial when participating in NIRAKN events. Here, we share the findings and offer insights into ways higher education institutions can support Indigenous HDR students in the successful completion of their degrees.

In Chap. 4, we discuss the role of agency in higher education. We argue that Indigenous HDR students navigating higher education institutions continue to face additional challenges that are not associated with the research degree they are pursuing. Racism continues to be identified as a barrier in academic settings and society. The impact of racism may affect an individual's agency and their ability to acquire academic capital. Both agency and academic capital may also influence how an individual is supported throughout their candidature and ultimately become a factor in the success of the HDR students' research degree. In this chapter, we discuss the role of agency and academic capital among Indigenous HDR students and then connect our findings about how Indigenous HDR students report that agency and/or academic capital has influenced their experience in higher education.

Chapter 5 focuses on the Indigenous HDR students' needs and experiences in academia. The study employed qualitative research methods including group discussions and individual written responses ($n = 34$) and an online survey ($n = 32$). The participants were Indigenous HDR students from different disciplinary fields from across Australia who participated in this research during 2018 and 2020. Specifically, this research project explored the students' needs and experiences during their candidature. We found that the role of supervisors in the students' HDR journey impacted their sense of agency and opportunities for mentorship and networking within their discipline. Indigenous HDR students specifically reported the need for: (1) quality supervision; (2) mentoring opportunities; and (3) access to research training. The reported needs bring the spotlight on how increasing retention rates of Indigenous HDR students might be possible.

Chapter 6 focuses on supervision as an influence of HDR students' success, as well as the key role supervisors play in triggering these students' capabilities. Furthermore, quality supervision provided to Indigenous HDR students has recently attracted the interest of many researchers in this field. This chapter provides an overview of the needs and experiences of supervisors of Indigenous HDR students. We surveyed 33 supervisors to understand their needs and experiences when supervising Indigenous HDR candidates. The perceptions of quality supervision, the good practices and concerns of supervisors and the professional development required for supervising Indigenous HDR students were asked of supervisors who participated in our study. Our study found that it is the mental health and well-being of Indigenous HDR students that raises concerns with their supervisors, while racism is still seen as prevalent. Keeping Indigenous HDR students motivated and on track and supporting Indigenous HDR students physically, mentally and academically were found to be significant concerns for supervisors.

Chapter 7 highlights the commonly held beliefs about Indigenous HDR students and offers ways to reframe these beliefs. This chapter draws on our experience in facilitating the NIRAKN capacity-building workshops. During these workshops, we continually heard what we refer to as 'the three myths about what an Indigenous HDR student ought to be doing'. The three myths are that an Indigenous HDR student needs to be: (1) supervised by an Indigenous supervisor, (2) using Indigenous research methodologies and (3) researching Indigenous issues. Following these workshops, we sought to understand the needs and experience of Indigenous HDR students and also the supervisors of these students. Informing this chapter are group discussions, written responses and surveys conducted with Indigenous HDR students ($n = 66$) and supervisors ($n = 33$). In this chapter, we argue against these myths to demonstrate that discipline expertise and/or methodological expertise is the most important variable that determines how all HDR students are paired with supervisors. We also argue that it is harmful and racist to expect Indigenous HDR students to use a prescribed methodology that is race-based. And that, the assumption that Indigenous HDR students should be researching Indigenous matters rather than their own research interests is problematic.

In Chap. 8, we conclude the book by synthesising what is needed for Indigenous HDR success. Throughout this book, we shared our experiences in conducting

capacity-building workshops and undertaking research about the needs and experiences of Indigenous HDR students in Australia. In total, we heard from 147 participants, which included 113 Indigenous HDR students from across Australia and 34 supervisors of Indigenous HDR students. The insights received from both the students and supervisors revealed that there are still opportunities to improve the HDR experience for Indigenous students. Based on our findings, in this chapter, we expand on the recommendations outlined in the Moreton-Robinson et al.'s (2020) report to include new data collected in 2020 from 32 Indigenous HDR students. We hope our recommendations, once acted upon, will have a positive impact on the success of Indigenous HDRs and that the insights shared by the Indigenous HDR candidates we heard from will have meaning and relevance for anyone pursuing a research degree.

Next, we discuss what guided the research project undertaken with Indigenous HDR students and/or supervisors of Indigenous HDRs students.

1.4 Reciprocity, Respect, Equality, Responsibility, Survival and Protection, Spirit and Integrity

The values of reciprocity, respect, equality, responsibility, survival and protection, spirit and integrity (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 2018) have shaped our practices and guided our approach.

In this project, we demonstrate spirit and integrity by searching for knowledge and understanding about how Indigenous HDR students can be enabled to succeed during their candidature. We also demonstrate our integrity as researchers by conducting this research honestly and by being fair and transparent about the findings of this project and by our commitment to equity, reciprocity, respect and responsibility (NHMRC, 2018). We demonstrate equity through actively engaging with Indigenous HDRs through the capacity-building workshops in which we co-teach about the pitfalls facing many Indigenous HDR students. We established equitable relationships with participants by listening to their experiences without judgement and reflecting on how we can improve Indigenous HDR students' pathways to success. We also established equitable relationships by minimising the risks of discomfort to participants during the data collection process and by ensuring the process for participants was fair. This project demonstrates reciprocity to address Universities Australia (UA) and the review of Australia's Research Training System undertaken by the Australian Council of Learned Academies' recommendation to ensure more Indigenous HDR students succeed and are represented in the academy with an academic career through the capacity-building workshops that incorporated the findings from this project for both Indigenous HDR students and their supervisors. We demonstrate respect to participants by ensuring conditions for consent were satisfied for the research and related activities including data analysis and publications. We also show respect by allowing participants to see their transcripts and modify and/or

withdraw any statements (where possible). The participants' privacy was respected throughout this project. Last, we demonstrate responsible practices by providing all relevant information relating to this project and the timely dissemination of results (see Moreton-Robinson et al., 2020).

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