

Chapter 8

What We Need for Success: Recommendations and Wishes



Abstract Throughout this book, we have shared our experiences of 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 across Australia and 34 supervisors of Indigenous HDR students. The insights received from both Indigenous HDR 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 (Report on Indigenous success in higher degree by research. Prepared for the Australian Government, Department of Education and Training, 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 HDR students and that the insights shared by the Indigenous HDR candidates we heard from will have meaning and relevance for anyone pursuing a research degree.

Keywords Indigenous HDR students · Higher degree by research · Recommendations · Higher education · Success

8.1 Overview

The recommendations we outline in this chapter are based on the newly collected data from 32 Indigenous HDR students from across Australia. Although the recommendations are about ways to improve the success of Indigenous HDRs in Australia, we believe our findings may also be of relevance to other countries with Indigenous populations, including New Zealand, Canada, the United States and Mexico. For example, in New Zealand, there is concern about the under-representation of Māori students in higher education and reports of students encountering obstacles to access higher education (Barnhardt, 2002; McKinley et al., 2011; Schofield et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2011). Māori students were also reported to experience cultural effacement and alienation similar to Indigenous Australians' experiences of university education (Barnhardt, 2002; Wilson et al., 2011). Cultural effacement and alienation are factors reported to be discouraging Indigenous students from participating in

higher education in Canada (Hauser et al., 2009), Mexico (Schmelkes, 2009) and Australia (Schofield et al., 2013), although universities in New Zealand, Canada and Mexico have responded to these issues with a range of approaches.

We are attempting to provide evidence-informed recommendations that may further support for Indigenous HDR students to complete their research degree. Despite our focus on Australia, we believe the findings reported in this book will be of value to Indigenous HDR students, supervisors of Indigenous HDR students, policy-makers at institutions and national leaders globally who are advocating for better conditions for Indigenous HDR students. The insights received from both Indigenous HDR students and supervisors of Indigenous HDR students in this book reveal that there are still opportunities to improve the HDR experience for Indigenous HDR students.

In this chapter, we expand on the recommendations outlined in the Moreton-Robinson et al.'s (2020) report, which included recommendations to: (1) advise Indigenous HDR students on the role of supervisors and the boundaries of that role; (2) instruct supervisors of Indigenous HDR students to be accountable for students' academic success, schedule regular meetings and provide high quality feedback; (3) advocate that higher education institutions ensure that students are supervised by a team of academics who possess relevant disciplinary knowledge and mentoring experience and who value Indigenous knowledges and cultures; and (4) urge national education policy makers to establish a national framework to support collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics.

8.2 Data Used to Inform This Chapter

Moreton-Robinson et al. (2020) report was informed by the group discussions and individual written responses that took place in 2018 (see Chap. 1 for the complete list of datasets). This chapter has been informed by data collected from 32 Indigenous HDR students who completed an online survey in 2020 (see Table 8.1). The completed surveys were downloaded and saved in an Excel spreadsheet and then uploaded into NVivo for analysis purposes. We read the responses and highlighted sections to code the responses and identify themes. Informing this chapter are specific questions we asked Indigenous HDR students about what they wished they could tell their supervisor to improve the relationship and what Indigenous HDR students would tell prospective HDR candidates.

We have incorporated the new data obtained from dataset 5 to make the following additional recommendations as part of quality supervision practices. These include: (1) offering career development advice to Indigenous HDR students seeking an academic career; (2) mentoring Indigenous HDR students throughout their candidature; and (3) providing ongoing research training initiatives for Indigenous HDR students. Although the additional recommendations can be incorporated into supervision practices, they may also need to be supported from within academia. For

Table 8.1 Dataset used to inform this chapter

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
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#
Total participants				32	

instance, we know that Indigenous academics are under-represented in higher education institutions across Australia (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2020). Therefore, greater efforts to encourage Indigenous HDR students into academic careers should be fostered during their research degrees. Having institutional support and targets could help to ensure this opportunity to increase Indigenous HDR pathways into academia is met. Similarly, ensuring that ongoing research training opportunities are available to Indigenous HDR students may also require a budget and approval from the school and/or faculty the student is enrolled in.

8.3 Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

One way that universities can help to increase the number of Indigenous academics employed is to establish pathways for Indigenous HDRs students to obtain academic roles during their candidature. For instance, co-author Melanie Saward is completing her PhD at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and was offered a pre-to-post doctoral appointment. This three-year Level A academic appointment means that Melanie is on a full-time salary, and completing a PhD is part of the research component making up 70% of her duties. The teaching duties make up 20% and are based on Melanie’s discipline expertise in creative writing. The remaining 10% is service and involves peer-reviewing journal articles and/or participating in committees. Following the successful completion of the PhD, a Level B position in the school will be offered to Melanie. This arrangement is only possible because the university agreed to increase the number of Indigenous academics and approved this scheme.

8.4 Recommendations for Supervisors

Faculty allocation of supervisors to Indigenous HDR students should be based on supervisors with the necessary discipline knowledge and/or methodological expertise required. Where possible, we encourage Indigenous HDR students to seek out the supervisors they are hoping to work with based on the discipline and/or methodological expertise. The importance of accepting the role of supervisor comes with a commitment to the student and interest in their proposed project. Noting that workload issues can have an impact on supervisors' availability, but that time is needed to ensure that they can meet with their students, provide constructive feedback and support Indigenous HDR students to be successful in their research journey.

Trudgett's (2011) framework of best practice for supervision includes four categories, including academic skills-based support from supervisors, personal reflection of supervisor, responsibilities of university and responsibilities of national bodies. The findings of this current study added more suggestions from Indigenous HDR students for supervisors, including that: (1) supervisors should set clear expectations for HDR students from the beginning of their research study; (2) supervisors should support HDR students and mentor students to develop a research career; (3) HDR students should be supervised by qualified supervisors with the discipline knowledge the student is seeking; and (4) supervisors need to make time to support their students.

Together, these findings provide important insights into the perspectives and experiences of Indigenous HDR students in research supervision. We also asked Indigenous HDR students' what suggestions they had to improve supervision practices. Students reported that to improve the quality of supervision, the relationships between Indigenous HDR students and their supervisors needed to be both effective and comfortable. The remaining recommendations come from Indigenous HDR students.

8.5 Students' Suggestions for Improved Supervision

An Indigenous HDR student suggested:

For my non-Indigenous supervisor, before supervising an Indigenous student, take an Indigenous studies unit at uni as a student and learn. Be open to challenging your assumptions. Sit in the position of learner rather than expert and understand that your student has the right to tackle this thesis in the way that they want to (OLS2_IndigenousHDR1).

Another Indigenous HDR student echoed the message above by highlighting the systemic racism that persists and how understanding is needed to ensure Indigenous HDR students succeed in higher education institutions.

Academia is a scary place for many of us, and institutions have been incredibly unkind to First Nations people historically, and we still live in a world where racism is extremely prevalent and where white supremacy is very much alive and can at times dictate the courses of our

lives. There are systemic implications for challenging those hegemonic structures, and there are lifelong consequences which present themselves in the form of trauma responses and ongoing triggers that limit our participation and well-being in those spaces. There are reasons for disengagement, reticence, and aversion that sometimes non-Indigenous supervisors will fail to comprehend. This is why cultural reflexivity, cultural responsiveness and social and intellectual flexibilities are important. It is potentially the difference between who succeeds and who fails in Indigenous HDR (OLS2_IndigenousHDR4).

In the interest of fostering success for Indigenous HDR students, one asked that supervisors remain positive and hold high expectations of this student:

Be accessible! Show an interest! Give positive feedback first, then constructive feedback! Support HDR students so they can develop a belief in themselves that they are capable. Build them up emotionally and educationally so they can stick with it for the long haul. Don't give up on HDR students or they will give up on themselves (OLS2_IndigenousHDR6).

On the other hand, Indigenous HDR students do not want their supervisors to think that they already know everything needed to complete a research degree:

Teach your students the processes of academy and the institution. I have had previous supervisors that either did not know or would not tell me things like how the methodology chapter works. I now have supervisors who are very prescriptive about the methodology chapter structure and it's super helpful (OLS2_IndigenousHDR9).

Another student shared similar thoughts but also pointed out that they wished to stay focused on completing the research degree and learning how their supervisors succeeded:

Don't assume I know things even though I appear very capable (this is pretty tricky, I realise). Don't assume that because I'm Aboriginal I want to discuss every racist event that comes up in the media, introduce me to the practices and people that helped you succeed (OLS2_IndigenousHDR19).

The additional responsibilities that some Indigenous HDR students face involve Community obligations that arise at various times including during the death of a Community member:

Understand that for me, community obligations, deaths, responsibilities, are different than your non-Indigenous students and all these things impact. I am sorry for that but there is little I can do (OLS2_IndigenousHDR31).

The need for understanding and extension on milestones might be needed to ensure Indigenous HDR students can complete both requirements to their studies and their community. Another Indigenous HDR student pointed out how their research degree is something that also has to stand up outside academia and needs to be something they feel proud of:

Guide us and make suggestions – but understand that this is our journey and we are governed by ourselves and our culture in what we produce and we have to be able to stand proudly by the finished work (OLS2_IndigenousHDR28).

Another student highlighted the importance of meeting the students about where they are regarding feedback. Being flexible about the condition of the writing may lead to more opportunities for the Indigenous HDR student to learn from their supervisors about what the thesis needs to look like:

More time to provide feedback and have a conversation. Flexibility in feedback, that is, working with students' feedback needs rather than setting the standard that all reviewed writing must be in final draft mode (OLS2_IndigenousHDR13).

The importance of engaging with the students work and correspondence was noted by one student that "make a point of reading applications and emails carefully. It is obvious to the student when either hasn't been read" (OLS2_IndigenousHDR8).

Many Indigenous HDR students also reported that they were happy with their supervisors and that they did not need to change anything. The need to spark interest, motivate, guide and expose Indigenous HDR students to the opportunities that lie within the academy was also reported. In the next section, we share the recommendations that Indigenous HDR students had for prospective HDR students.

8.6 Recommendations for Prospective Indigenous HDR Students

When we asked Indigenous HDR students what recommendations they would provide to someone thinking about enrolling in a research degree, they had plenty of advice to share. One Indigenous HDR student recommended that they "love your subject area – if you aren't driven and passionate it will be hard slog!" The need to be driven by passion was also shared by another HDR student who suggested that students:

Study something you are passionate about, otherwise I don't think you will enjoy it. Also, if possible, try to study full time by obtaining a scholarship or something similar so you don't have to worry about an income or studying and working at the same time, otherwise it can get too much and your study can be put off (OLS2_IndigenousHDR34).

The important of understanding why you are pursuing a research degree was also mentioned. This participant suggested questioning your motivation: "Is it for your career? Is it for pleasure/interest? These are two very different motivations" (OLS2_IndigenousHDR16). If it is career related, a different approach to candidature might be taken as the need to build a competitive CV along the way is often recommended. Another Indigenous HDR student summarised three key factors in a successful HDR journey:

The three most important factors for considering a HDR are (1) whether or not you have access to adequate financial support, (2) finding a supervisor with whom you can have a positive and productive relationship, and (3) ensuring that you have good social and emotional well-being support (OLS2_IndigenousHDR25).

The need for support was also shared by another participant who recommended “finding an Indigenous cohort or HDR community as it’s lonely” (OLS2_IndigenousHDR31). Another Indigenous HDR student mentioned the importance of speaking to other HDR students to learn from their experiences:

Talk to every single PhD candidate you can about their experience in the school/institution they are in, where possible choose your supervisor with great care (erring on personal relationship if in doubt because that will help you in the long run) but realise that the HE sector is pretty fluid right now and the chances that you will have to change supervisor at some point is very high (they move jobs, have lives, etc.) (OLS2_IndigenousHDR19).

The need to understand how other HDR students were able to submit theses or dissertations was also recommended as a strategy that “speak to current PhD students about the struggles of PhD life. Speak to those students who have recently submitted about what it took to get across the line” (OLS2_IndigenousHDR23).

Having a support system that includes your supervisory team was also recommended:

Make sure you pick a topic that is true to yourself and a supervisor who understands and respects your vision. Also, ensure you have a support system, because it can and will get very hard (OLS2_IndigenousHDR28).

The importance of reconnecting was also mentioned that “Take time each day to reconnect with country, family and our ancestors. Draw strength from them and remind yourself daily of why you are doing research” (OLS2_IndigenousHDR30).

From the above advice from Indigenous HDR students to prospective research student, it can be seen that there is a mix of both strategic advice relating to supervisors and completing the degree and well-being advice about ensuring you have support systems in place.

8.7 Summary

In this chapter, we have extended the recommendations for ensuring the success pathway of Indigenous HDR students. Our recommendations are applicable to decision-makers who are able to create positions for Indigenous HDR students to transition to academic positions during their research degrees, as well to supervisors and prospective HDR students. We hope the insights from Indigenous HDR students across Australia provide a glimpse into what is needed to make improvements that might result in more Indigenous HDR completions and more Indigenous academics in higher education institutions. We thank all the Indigenous HDR students who participated in our research projects and/or capacity-building workshop offered through National Indigenous Research and Knowledge Network (NIRAKN) over the years. We wish continued success to all Indigenous HDR around the globe.

Throughout this book and these research projects, good rapport between Indigenous HDR students and supervisors was highlighted to be a key enabling factor for Indigenous HDR students to succeed. Although the relationship between Indigenous

HDR students and supervisors is well addressed across this book, the role gender plays in the supervisory relationship was not explored. Identifying what role gender plays in the ongoing success of the Indigenous student–supervisor relationship is an area for further work.

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