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# Exploring Aboriginal Identity in Australia and Building Resilience

Clair Andersen

## Abstract

This chapter will discuss the challenges faced by Aboriginal people seeking recognition of their identity as Indigenous Australians. It will explore government policies, their impact on identity formation and the ongoing impact of colonisation on education and health outcomes for Indigenous people in Australia. The issues raised will include historical and contemporary experiences as well personal values and attitudes. The strategies and programs introduced within educational settings as part of an inclusive practice regime will be highlighted. Aboriginal people have faced many challenges, and continue to do so in postcolonial times, including challenges to their identity.

**Keywords:** identity, health, education, resilience

## 1. Introduction

Sir William Deane, Governor-General, Inaugural Lingiari Lecture

*the past is never fully gone. It is absorbed into the present and the future. The present plight, in terms of health, employment, education, living conditions and self-esteem, of so many Aborigines must be acknowledged as largely flowing from what happened in the past (....) the new diseases, the alcohol and the new pressures of living were all introduced. ([1], p. 20)*

Australia's First peoples have survived the following common experiences, invasion, dispersal from their land as well as suffering and loss due to introduced diseases. It is important for all Australians both settlers and migrants to understand the enduring relationship of Aboriginal peoples to their Land and the importance of these relationships for health and well-being.

While Silas Roberts, the first chairman of the Northern Land Council said 'when deprived of their Land, our people are like Christians without souls, wandering aimlessly, people without a purpose' [2]; Auntie Jean Carter, Community Elder, states, 'We're not disposed people. We still walk this land. We still are the owners of this land' [3].

These comments are indicative of the continuing debate around the identity of Aboriginal people and their connection to land with the ongoing impact of colonisation in Australia.

## 2. Who is indigenous in Australia?

The current Australian definition of Indigeneity states that an Indigenous person is one who:

- has Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
- identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person
- is accepted as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander by the community in which he or she lives.

This definition developed by the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs in the 1980s [4] is widely accepted within government departments, statutory bodies and institutions, but is sometimes contested by Aboriginal groups as imposed. Many Aboriginal people find themselves with questions about their identity. Some Aboriginal people have strong knowledgeable identities. Others are unsure of their identity. Others are discovering their identity. Some are proud of their identity. Others are not. Some Aboriginal people feel caught between two worlds—white and black. People who do not know their stories and history may not be sure of their identity, this in turn impacts on how they feel about themselves and how they relate to service providers including health and education institutions.

One example is that of Bronwyn Carlson, an Illawarra woman who always knew her family had been ‘touched by the tar brush’ (p. 1) but was unsure about this aspersion for the first 30 years of her life. It was only while attending Wollongong University as mature-aged student that she came to appreciate what her recently-clarified Aboriginal ancestry ‘meant’ (p. 6), and this awakening gave her a belonging that had been sorely missed during her troubled youth. Her declarations of Indigeneity however raised new concerns by attracting opposition from White Australians, and members of the Aboriginal community. ‘After what I had been through’, Carlson writes, ‘I did not expect to be questioned about my family, and where we hailed from, to validate my claim to Aboriginality’ (p. 6). Despite obtaining a ‘Confirmation of Aboriginality’, and employment within the Aboriginal organisations tasked with awarding confirmation certificates, Bronwyn continues to be ‘abused, slandered and libelled’ (p. 10) by those who doubt her claim to Indigeneity mainly because she has a New Zealand accent [5, 46].

The power of people to say who they are, to define their own identity and to relate their history is fundamental to their existence. The right to Aboriginal identity is affirmed by the United Nations [47], which states self-identification is a fundamental right underlined in a number of human rights documents. This right to Aboriginal identity was confirmed through a high court challenge in Tasmania ([6], FCA 389).

In Australia Aboriginal people have been hostage, in the main, to images created by non-Aboriginal Australians. There are different stories, for example—1788—Aboriginal people call it the invasion and non-Aboriginal people call it British settlement. The history since 1788 has had a dramatic impact on identity.

Behrendt [7] suggests that:

*The tensions between Indigenous Australians and the dominant culture are wrapped up in identity: how Australians see themselves, how they see others and*

*how they want society to respect who they are... How societies deal with 'otherness' and 'sameness' will impact on their ability to allow individuals freedom from oppression and enough scope for the exercise of liberty. ([7], p. 76)*

According to Stuurman [8]

*...We have learned that institutionalized violence is carried out in many ways. You don't need a gun to kill a man: all you have to do is deny him his self-respect and over a period of years you will kill him, you mentally castrate him. The only way to counteract this thing, this slow death, is to enthuse in Blacks, very aggressively, a sense of Aboriginality, self-awareness, a cultural and personal identity as a part of a national group, as an Aboriginal society. We see that Blacks are poverty stricken and completely defenceless as far as economic power is concerned, subject to manipulation by the white power structure, being used as cheap labour. We cannot counteract this white structure. What we can do and what we are trying to do, is instilled in the Black person a sense of self-awareness and self-respect. This is the only way we can survive nowadays.*

While Everett [9] explains that, being Aboriginal is based on spiritual-cultural beliefs which are connected to the worldly universe, and can be defined as follows:

*'We can see Aboriginality as a philosophical set of rules that are manifested in customary cultural practices which are set within a belief in the Great Spirit which comprises our Spiritual All. Aboriginality is the recognition by peoples that they are citizens of the worldly universe. The Earth is what nurtures us all - flora, fauna, rocks, water and air - and humans. The Earth is our Earth Mother and we are all citizens of our earth Mother. That is a core within the full meaning of Aboriginality.'*

*'It is about showing respect for all entities of the natural world as equal citizens of our Earth Mother, and as equal manifestations of the Spirit World. It is an education in doing. [Aboriginal] ...education is not simply about human needs and self-interests, but wholly about sharing life-giving sustenance between people and other entities of the natural world. The doing is about living together in respect, about demonstrating respect through protecting other's interests. If, for example, we pollute our water citizen then we have failed to respect and protect it and thus the water will be impure and cause illness to the water and other citizens who need it' [10].*

### 3. What does it mean to be Aboriginal in Australia today?

This question was asked of Aboriginal people in the Blak Side Story project in Footscray, Victoria. Their answers are recorded on video at <http://www.cake.net.au/blaksidestory/quilt.html>

Further comments regarding identity include:

Aboriginal people define Aboriginality not by skin colour but by relationships.

*'You can only be a proud Aboriginal person if you carry your own learning and cultural lifestyle with you'. Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Chairman Yothu Yindi Foundation ([11], p. 37)*

*'To me, Aboriginality is about that shared experience, that shared culture and that shared pride'. McQuire [12], Aboriginal journalist (NIT 10/7/2008 p. 25)*

*'For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples it is our beliefs, our culture, and our family histories that contribute to our sense of who we are and what we mean to others. They are our source of belonging—and they anchor us and steer our course through our lives' [13], Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner (SMH 25/11/2011).*

*'Once we were too black and now we are too white. We reject that. Black or white, we are and always will be Aboriginal because of our unique cultural experience and identity. Aboriginality is not a question of skin colour—it is about our cultural connection to our communities and our history, a history that is alive and thriving'. Abigail Burchill, President Tarwirri Indigenous Law Students and Lawyers Association ([45], p. 4)*

Coe [14] goes on to argue that the Aboriginal child in school:

*Is sitting on the fence between white culture and black culture, not really belonging to either...*

*In going through a white school system, he (sic) has been forced to aspire towards lower middleclass values. He has been conditioned to up hold and try to keep white material values.*

*He is out in a position where he is caught in a tug of two cultures. There are two pulls on this black kid: he doesn't know which way to go - to forsake his Aboriginal identity and become an imitation white?*

This leads to the place of culture and identity for Indigenous students in Australia and the ways to develop, foster and encourage educational participation and success. A crucial element is the place of, and practices around, Indigenous culture and identity within the Australian educational system. For many Indigenous students and their families there is a clash between dominant educational culture and curriculum and their own culture and identity. Not only is English not always the first (or even second) language of many Indigenous students, but for those who predominantly speak English, the cultural use and meanings of language can be very different. Indigenous ways of learning and interacting and non-Indigenous ways of learning and interacting also do not necessarily coincide. The result of such cultural differences can be an exclusion of the Indigenous student from engaging in classroom activities, even if the student is present in class. A lack of recognition of Indigenous culture and identity from the school culture and identity can result in the effective exclusion of the Indigenous student and their family from the school community.

Hopefully this is changing with the introduction of the following professional standards for graduates in Teacher Education by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL):

1.4 Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and  
2.4 Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians [15].

#### 4. Culture, and identity in education

The importance of the recognition of Indigenous students' culture and identity must not be overlooked. Curricula in Australian schools tend to reflect and transmit



the values and styles of non-Indigenous society, with little regard to Indigenous culture and society.

Many educators are now striving to incorporate an Indigenous perspective in their teaching plans, and although this will help to educate non-Indigenous Australians about Aboriginal ways, it will not completely address the academic success of Indigenous students. In 1987 the NAEC (National Aboriginal Education Council n.d.) identified the clash between the schooling system and the home environment as a key factor in the educational underachievement of Indigenous students. In response, the NAEC recommended the following policies for Indigenous education, which remain relevant today:

1. Education for Aboriginal people must be a process that builds on what Aboriginal people are by recognising and developing their natural potential and not by destroying their cultural heritage. Changes to the school system would enable a strong Aboriginal identity to be a positive education factor.
2. Aboriginal studies must become an integral part of the education of every Australian. It must be taught with a high degree of respect and understanding to develop an accurate knowledge of Australian history, Aboriginal cultures and lifestyles.
3. The educational services offered to both traditional and non-traditional Aboriginal people must aim for and be capable of developing and strengthening knowledge of and pride in their cultural heritage, as well as obtaining academic and technological skills required of Australians today. To ensure effective learning, the latter must be acquired in harmony with the Aboriginal person's own cultural values, identity and choice of lifestyle, whether they are residing in an urban, rural, traditional community or homeland centre.
4. To ensure the effectiveness of education services for Aboriginal people, they must play the major part in delivery of those services. This requires immediate and substantial change in policy, and implementation of new programs to train and employ Aboriginal people in the various fields of education so that they can take responsibility for implementing policies and delivering programs in Aboriginal education.

A school's engagement with Indigenous parents is also a vital part of improving the effectiveness of Indigenous education. Aboriginal parents are very aware of the importance of education for their children and all want their children to succeed. But when parents do not share the same values embodied in schooling, they are less inclined to encourage educational success. Many Aboriginal parents also lack the experience, knowledge and resources to aid their child's education, not to mention limited or negative experiences in their own schooling.

For many Indigenous people, their past experience of the education system means that 'schools were just another invention by which white Australian society sought to control their lives' and a means 'of dislocating Aboriginal children from Aboriginal culture' [16]. More importantly, schooling failed to reflect and/or include Aboriginal values and learning styles. Indigenous parents continue to express the desire for their children to be able to function in both their own culture and the wider Australian community. That is, they want their children to be educated, but not at the expense of losing their identity and their culture.

There are four principal components of the curriculum process that impact on student learning: the teacher, including the ways in which the teacher makes

decisions, instructs and transmits knowledge; the students, who are active participants in educational process; the social context within which interaction occurs; and, finally, the content of the curriculum. We need to focus on making changes within each component to influence the outcomes of schooling for Aboriginal students.

Giroux [17] states that educators need to approach learning not merely as the acquisition of knowledge but also as the production of cultural practices that offer students a sense of identity, place and hope. This approach—the integration of culture and cultural practices into teaching and learning—is central to successful education for Indigenous students. Crucial to teaching and learning is the relationship between the school, teachers and students and their communities. While Partington [18] informs us, ‘at times it may be appropriate to focus on culturally instruction; at other times the elimination of racism and oppression may be an essential step in the process of education, and for some compensatory education to rectify deprived circumstances may be needed. We need to engage all approaches in the education of Aboriginal students by assuming a holistic view of the participants in the process, the situation in which learning occurs and the curriculum content which is desirable.’

As well as an approach which stresses the necessary attributes of schools in creating positive schooling outcomes for Indigenous students, literature is emerging around the importance of student identity in understanding the Indigenous experience of schooling and related success [19–21]. McDonald identifies the multi-layered issues of identity Aboriginal students have to negotiate between home, school, peers and community. He also stresses the point that to develop positive self-identity, there needs to be a perceived value in school as students and an experience of school success ([21], p. 5).

While Herbert states, ‘Prior to attempting to address cultural issues, it is critical to recognise the complexity of the task and the huge diversity of the cultural experience of individual Aboriginal people. The task may be daunting but there is no doubt that the need of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to maintain their cultural identity must not be overlooked.’ The words of an Indigenous Education Worker highlight this issue:

*There is also a bit of an identity crisis too, in terms of how teachers and the school system perceive Aboriginals. A lot of these mixed marriages where the Aboriginal kids are not dark, ‘What are you doing in this class, you’re not Aboriginal. Why do you want to do Aboriginal Studies; you should be over there doing something else.’ There is a lot of misinterpretation about what it is to be Aboriginal - who is an Aboriginal? They seem to run into a lot of conflict, not only from the teachers but also from the Aboriginal kids who are dark. Unless they know the parents, or they come from that area, particularly if they move around a lot, there is a lot of conflict within themselves, like who they are, what they are. What is an Aboriginal? The school system thinks that an Aboriginal comes from the Northern Territory ([22], p. 15)*

In Australia today many Aboriginal people live in cities, towns and other urban areas away from their traditional lands. Many have maintained their ‘identity’ and culture through family and Aboriginal community organisations. These networks give physical and emotional support and provide a sense of security and belonging. Aboriginal community organisations have been established with a focus on meeting specific Aboriginal needs. Generally Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are reluctant to access mainstream services, as the delivery of specialist services through Aboriginal organisations is more acceptable.

This is true within higher education settings as well where the establishment of Indigenous Support Centres have aided increased participation and success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students [23]. One such example is the Murina pathway program delivered by the Riawunna Centre at the University of Tasmania, in which students confirm their identity is welcomed and affirmed - Murina students 'have celebrated their identity in a place they never thought they could' ([24]).

## 5. Education is vital

For the future empowerment, self-determination and advancement of Indigenous peoples and communities education is the key. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) states that through education, Indigenous people have the right to control, protect and develop Indigenous cultures and knowledge; and the right to an education without discrimination.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia is still largely dominated by western educative frameworks however this should change with the new professional standards for Teacher Education graduates.

Australia's Indigenous population is under-represented in the university system. According to the (Behrendt Review, [25]) Indigenous people comprised 2.2% of the overall population, but only 1.4% of student enrolments at university in 2010, including only 1.1% of higher degree by research enrolments. Recommendation 10 of this review (2012) states:

*That universities adopt a whole-of-university approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student success so that faculties and mainstream support services have primary responsibility for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, backed up by Indigenous Education Units (p. 19)*

Implementing a Whole-of-University Approach to Improving Indigenous Access and Achievement ([26] pp. 3–5) identified the following seven key characteristics as necessary and could not work without each other: Acknowledgement of culture; Clear governance and accountability arrangements; Policy leadership; Processes; Capability; and Connection with communities.

Higher education can improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

Through universities, aspirations are raised, opportunities created and lives transformed;

The role of universities in creating social mobility is well illustrated by those who are the 'first in their family' [27];

Providing pathways into positions of greater influence will drive real improvements for Indigenous communities and the nation as a whole [28].

The literature highlights the importance of the 3 R's: respect, recognition and relationship to improve success in education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students [29, 30].

### 5.1 In our primary and secondary schools we need

- Caring, interested, nurturing teachers dedicated to Aboriginal Education<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal Education is education for Indigenous Australian students and about Indigenous Australia for all students.



- Culturally safe learning environments.
- Curriculum that is, student focused and responsive to their individual needs.
- Clear pathways to further study and career planning.
- Contact with roles models because you cannot be what you cannot see [31].

## **5.2 In our universities we need**

An overarching Indigenous strategy with other supporting strategies linked to core areas such as Indigenous Learning and Teaching and Indigenous Research.

- Cultural programs across Whole -of -university that create a culturally safe and culturally responsive environment for all students, staff and university community.
- Designated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spaces and recognition of their contribution to the institution.
- Respectful and reciprocal collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to achieve quality outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education.
- Whole-of-university recognition of Indigenous workforce esteem factors.
- Indigenous employment performance targets for Vice Chancellors and other senior executives.
- Innovative recruitment strategies that promote the academy as a preferred career option and targets Indigenous graduates and final year graduands.
- Implementing these practices across all education sectors will enhance the wellbeing, resilience and success of Indigenous students.

## **5.3 The current situation**

The Universities Australia *Indigenous Strategy 2017-2020* is driving and focusing effort in the sector [32]. In response, the University of Tasmania (UTAS) has developed and is implementing a Strategic Plan for Aboriginal Engagement 2017–2020 focusing on enrolment, retention and success, Indigenous knowledge and employment strategies [33]. It has also relocated the Riawunna Centre for Aboriginal Education, a place for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples studying at UTAS to a central position on campus, [www.utas.edu.au/riawunna](http://www.utas.edu.au/riawunna).

The UTAS Aboriginal Engagement strategy is guiding efforts on the participation and success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across the University, while the Riawunna Centre in its new location is more accessible to Hobart students and with its full complement of Higher Education Officers is well placed to recruit and support students on all campuses. The formation of an Aboriginal Leadership Group comprising the Pro Vice Chancellor Indigenous Leadership and Research, the Riawunna Head of Service and the Aboriginal Higher Education Advisor along with the appointment of an Aboriginal Employment Officer sends a strong message that UTAS is serious about Aboriginal education and employment.

## 5.4 Closing the Gap 2018 Report

As we look back on the 10 years that the Closing the Gap framework has been in place, we can see gains being made through the concerted efforts of states and territories working together to address common goals agreed by the Council of Australian Governments in 2008:

- The annual growth rate of Supply Nation registered Indigenous businesses is an average of 12.5%.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, on average, are living longer and factors contributing to the gap such as death from circulatory disease (heart attack and stroke) are going down.
- Around 14,700 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are enrolled in early childhood education the year before full-time school, and there have been improvements in literacy and numeracy.
- More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are staying in school through to Year 12 [34].

While closing the employment gap is challenging, we know educational attainment opens pathways to greater economic opportunity and can make an important difference in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

## 5.5 My contribution

For more than 30 years I have been actively involved in the development of policies to improve the education outcomes for First Australians and learning resources to enhance the knowledge of all students about Australia's rich history and its Indigenous peoples. One resource which has been particularly successful is the cultural safety program *Come Walk with Us*, which was recognised with a Teaching and Learning Merit Award in 2017. This program was developed collaboratively with Aboriginal community members who were keen to share their experience to enrich the understanding of future graduates. Initially it was used to underpin the health curriculum at UTAS, as a well-trained health workforce will help to secure improved health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The program has since been extended across several degrees at the university and is in demand from external agencies. This demand is largely the result of UTAS graduates gaining employment in the sector and recommending the program for staff development in their respective agencies, including Primary Health Tasmania, Diabetes Tasmania, Rural Health Tasmania and Population Health Tasmania.

The development of effective health care delivery for Australia's First Peoples is currently one of the underpinning strategies to improve Indigenous health outcomes. Better informed health professionals and a well-trained health workforce will help to secure and sustain health improvements for Indigenous Australians. Responding to the poor education and health of Indigenous Australians at UTAS started with a Teaching and Learning grant to develop the CWWU program and digital Health Theme Bank<sup>2</sup> to provide resources for staff to use in their teaching.

It is acknowledged that practitioners working with Indigenous Australians need a diverse range of skills to deliver care and prevent the development of

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.utas.edu.au/indigenous-health-theme-bank>.

chronic illness [35–37]. Learning these skills is likely to be more effective if integrated within the structure of the existing curriculum; this approach underpinned the health curriculum project of which *Come Walk With Us* is a key strategy. The program assists staff and students to gain some initial understandings to support the ongoing integration of Indigenous content across their studies at the University.

*Come Walk with Us* offers an introductory three-hour safe learning environment workshop with a Tasmanian Aboriginal context, described as a ‘walk’ through Aboriginal history in Tasmania. It is now a mandatory core part of the following courses: medicine, pharmacy, psychology, and social work, and is an elective in education and nursing.

Where CWWU is a core component of a course, an exam question is developed in consultation with the unit or course co-ordinator for inclusion in the end of semester exam to assess understanding of the impact of social determinants of health on Indigenous Australians.

At the end of each CWWU session participants are invited to complete a feedback sheet. This information provides insight on how they have responded to the session and alerts any gaps for future inclusion. The content has evolved over time in response to participant feedback and to include new significant achievements on the path to improving the health and education of Indigenous Australians. Since CWWU was first developed in 2004 it has been revised and updated every 2 years to keep content current. Following are some examples of feedback provided by participants.

Feedback from staff:

- The activity-based approach is excellent – well done – such a wonderful experience.
- A great opportunity to gain some fundamental knowledge of Aboriginal history.
- This journey dispelled some untrue stories.
- It was great to learn more about Aboriginal history in Tasmanian. Very good for increasing awareness and consideration for including Aboriginal history and knowledge in my teaching.
- Should be compulsory for every Tasmanian.
- Thanks for today’s session it was great value, a lot of the stuff I understood from my own work background which I tried to reflect in my feedback but I just wanted to add that it was a really good introduction for those that have not had much exposure to Aboriginal culture and particularly Tasmanian Aboriginal history.
- This session is invaluable to a personal and intellectual understanding of the impact of: the colonisation of Tasmania on the Aboriginal people of this island; understanding NI [non-Indigenous] culture; and understanding the fluidity of ethics. It is also important for a fuller understanding of the rationale for the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] standards.

Feedback from students:

- Thank you for demonstrating the intensity of this era in history.
- The map is powerful and thought provoking.
- The workshop has helped me to understand that I need to learn more.
- The history was related to real life stories/events – made it easier to understand. The activities made workshop interactive and interesting.
- I liked the interactive ‘journey’ we were able to follow and be a part of, having us take a walk in their shoes.
- High levels of interaction, lots of questions asked which promoted active listening.

Evidence points to the pivotal role of cultural identity in shaping wellbeing for Indigenous Australians and other indigenous peoples around the world, and also because stronger cultural identity appears to promote greater participation and achievement in education and training [38], it is imperative that our university courses are inclusive of Australia’s Indigenous cultures and histories to enhance the successful completion of studies by Indigenous students so they can more readily provide for their families, and contribute to their communities and the broader society. The CWWU program makes an important contribution to doing this at UTAS.

All programs and services for Indigenous Australians should be based on ‘cultural respect—recognition and respect of the inherent rights and traditions of Indigenous Australians which incorporates a holistic approach involving partnership, resilience building and accountability’ [39]. This is the message promoted to students and staff at UTAS to try to counter the view that universities in Australia continue to be places of white habitus (Bourdieu, [40]) where race capital ensures reproduction of white privilege, whereby Indigenous needs are not addressed [41, 42].

To further address this concern my other projects have focused on the story of place, the stories of the land on which the University is situated. This work involves Aboriginal people through the formation of reference groups and has facilitated the creation of rich resources including The Orb<sup>3</sup> and the Aboriginal Story Map<sup>4</sup> which can be used as teaching resources in schools and the university as well as by the general public to enhance learning and understanding.

A current project is the *Linking of Two Bays* which aims to provide access to information about the University locations and the link with Palawa<sup>5</sup> places to engage students and staff with the deep history of the island of Tasmania in Australia.

The project was initiated as a Community Engagement project during 2017 with stakeholders highlighting the following:

1. The need for non-Aboriginal people to learn more about the contribution made to history by Aboriginal people in Tasmania; and

<sup>3</sup> The Orb, <https://www.theorb.tas.gov.au/>.

<sup>4</sup> Aboriginal Tasmania Story Map, <http://www.media.utas.edu.au/general-news/all-news/online-interactive-aboriginal-story-map-launched>.

<sup>5</sup> palawa the name of the Aboriginal people of Tasmania.



2. The importance of Aboriginal peoples to identify, record and write their own histories of self and of country. The project team comprised six members who were joined by four major Aboriginal community groups, and more than 60 people have been involved in creating the resource.

We have called this project the *Linking of Two Bays* to show the ongoing connection between Emu Bay in Burnie and Sandy Bay in Hobart. This resource will provide access to a wide audience to learn more about Tasmania's Aboriginal history. It is designed for everyone to use, residents, tourists, students and teachers. It will also continue to evolve with ongoing collaboration and development.

By intertwining historical perspectives we share that the sites are living, that there is language and a message to be heard. The voice of the land may have diminished, but signs of a transformation are evident, and a conciliation of these voices enables real listening to ancient insights and deeper participation with place.

This digital story of place project has revealed Aboriginal names, language and history of place to encourage greater understanding of the islands' deep history. It also enables UTAS to foster attachment, belonging and identity for Indigenous students [43].

## 6. Conclusion

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education needs to be everybody's business, and not the sole responsibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. This is now reflected in UTAS's new strategic plan, but it also needs to be the focus of attention and effort at all levels of schooling from Kindergarten to Year 12 and in all education and training institutions. Our students need to be supported and encouraged throughout their learning journey, they need to believe in the benefits of education and they need to see and hear their peoples' voices in the learning materials and have contact with their own inspiring role models.

Our current arrangements seem to be working well but we need to

- work collaboratively with schools, colleges and training providers including TAFE institutes;
- provide clear pathway and alternative entry information to students and develop relationships with key people who are best placed to do this;
- create opportunities for students to connect personally with the university through social events on campus involvement in targeted specialised programs to explore career and study options such as the tunapri<sup>6</sup> nursing, tunapri education and tunapri STEM<sup>7</sup> programs.

We also need to maintain and expand the provision of bursaries awarded at the end of year 10 for years 11 and 12 and continue financial support with scholarships for university, as these send a strong message to students and their family that we believe they can be successful.

These initiatives are needed across the nation as the population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is young and growing each year [44, 45].

<sup>6</sup> tunapri is an Aboriginal Tasmanian word meaning 'to know'

<sup>7</sup> STEM is Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths.

Our students need to believe they can come to university, will be supported, are welcome and will not have their identity challenged. While our governments must continue to focus effort and resources on improving education and employment outcomes for Australia's First Peoples.

### **Conflict of interest**

I confirm there are no conflicts of interest.

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