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Building and strengthening Indigenous early career researcher trajectories

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ABSTRACT

Due to their Indigeneity, Indigenous early career researchers are positioned differently and therefore experience the higher education sector differently to their non-Indigenous peers. Such positioning significantly impacts the development and progression of Indigenous academic research career trajectories. This article reports from the first stage of a three-year longitudinal study to examine the self-identified support needs of Indigenous early career researchers. The findings offer six factors that are crucial in supporting Indigenous early career researchers to develop and establish sound research careers within the academy. This article engages Indigenous standpoints related to the cultural interface and Indigenist research, with a view to shaping institutional responses to supporting Indigenous research career trajectories and further to recognise Indigenous Knowledges as integral to building global academies of teaching, learning and research.

Introduction

An increasing amount of attention has been given to growing the number of academic and professional Indigenous[1] staff in the Australian higher education sector (Behrendt et al., 2012; Coates et al., 2021; Page et al., 2017). The rationale to increase the number of Indigenous staff is based on a growing body of literature which suggests there are benefits to Indigenous students and to the academy itself. Firstly, employing Indigenous academics and senior staff in higher education is an effective mechanism to increase engagement and completion rates of both undergraduate and post graduate Indigenous students (Barney, 2018; Page et al., 2017; Trudgett, 2009, 2011).

Secondly, research reports higher education is a key determinant to a country's social and economic progress (Behrendt et al., 2012; Theodore et al., 2016) and Indigenous Knowledges contribute to Australia's intellectual and cultural capacity (Buckskin et al., 2018; Universities Australia, 2020). Employment of Indigenous people in the academy is instrumental in building richer global academies and to social and economic growth

(Behrendt et al., 2012; Theodore et al., 2016). In the final report on *Accelerating Indigenous Higher Education*, Buckskin et al. (2018) advocated, *truly valuing the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, experiences and perspectives adds depth and quality to any learning environment and to the global society* (p. 28).

A growing body of international literature has explored the experiences and success factors of Indigenous and First Nations doctoral students and academics (Naepi et al., 2020; Page et al., 2017; Trudgett, 2011). Research has drawn attention to the fact that Indigenous and First Nations academics are faced with additional barriers not experienced by their non-Indigenous peers or colleagues (Fredericks & White, 2018; Page & Asmar, 2008; Pihama et al., 2018; Thunig & Jones, 2020). Much of the literature notes the under-representation of Indigenous staff in the academy (Asmar & Page, 2018; Trudgett et al., 2021; Universities Australia, 2020) and how the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment greatly restricts Indigenous agency in academic spaces (Coates et al., 2021; Nakata, 2007).

However, there is a paucity in Australian literature about the specific experiences of Indigenous early career researchers[2] (ECRs). In this study we used Bazeley's (2003) definition of the ECR phase as the first five years of an academic career following the conferral of a PhD. Thus this phase is a crucial time when an ECR works towards establishing themselves as a competent researcher and a desirable candidate for tenure in the academy (Browning et al., 2014). It is therefore necessary to identify and examine the unique position of Indigenous ECRs and to investigate their perspectives on building Indigenous research capacity towards *raising the profile of research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, enriching the national research effort and supporting research* (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. 209).

Reporting on data derived from stage one of the *Developing Indigenous Early Career Researchers* project, this article presents six specific factors identified by Indigenous ECRs that set them apart from their non-Indigenous colleagues. To finish, the article engages the concept of contested space (Nakata, 2007) and literature authored by Indigenous and First Nations scholars to problematise (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011) the way in which Indigenous ECRs are differently positioned in the academy to their non-Indigenous colleagues.

Methods

The *Developing Indigenous ECRs* project is a three-year longitudinal study, funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC). Using a qualitative methods approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), Indigenous ECRs were invited to share their stories and experiences in semi-structured and culturally safe interviews (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). The research was conducted by three Indigenous scholars, comprising two professors (authors two and three) and an Indigenous early career researcher (author one). A three-year longitudinal approach was employed to facilitate the exploration of 'evolving and complex processes' (Murray et al., 2009) of the developmental trajectories of the careers of Indigenous ECRs. It was believed that the longitudinal nature of the project facilitated more trustful research relationships with its Indigenous participants (Martin, 2008; Povey & Trudgett, 2019).

This article reports on stage one findings from online interviews conducted in 2020 with 30 Indigenous ECRs employed in 21 different institutions across Australia.

In this cohort, just under half (14) were first year ECRs and seven were in their second year. Thus, 70% of participants were within the first two years of the five-year ECR phase. Interestingly, 13 have been employed in the higher education sector between 11 and 13 years, nine for 6–8 years and eight from 1 to 5 years. However, 17 were employed at academic Level B[3] with only ten at academic Level C. Employment level progression will be specifically addressed in a future paper that compares employment details across all three stages of the project. Additional demographic information of this Indigenous ECR cohort was presented in an earlier paper (Locke et al., 2021).

All interviews were transcribed by a professional service and then forwarded to the appropriate Indigenous ECR participant for approval. The approved transcripts were uploaded to the qualitative data analysis computer software package NVivo 12. Demographic data and broad themes were initially coded by the first author. This was followed by a deeper thematic analysis of data that identified further nuanced themes under the broader themes of the vast variety of Indigenous ECR experiences and viewpoints (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019).

Findings

Australian Indigenous ECRs defining their career trajectory needs

Findings from stage one data revealed vast diversity regarding participants' experience and employment conditions (Locke et al., 2021). As a result, the level and type of support sought by Indigenous ECRs also varied. However, all Indigenous ECRs expressed a need to increase the availability of culturally relevant support by establishing and/or building on existing Indigenous networks with both Indigenous colleagues and community.

Figure 1 illustrates six factors that have been developed from the shared experiences and perspectives of our Indigenous ECR cohort. It has been designed to centre Indigenous voices as each factor is specific to the self-identified needs of Indigenous ECRs. In Figure 1 each factor is visibly connected to the central goal of *supporting Indigenous ECR success* and as such, each factor has the potential to affect and/or enable another.

Transitions and pathways

One of the most crucial aspects to developing a sound and successful career in higher education is to firstly secure an academic position that provides opportunities to conduct research and therefore produce publications on which to build one's academic research profile and reputation. An interesting finding that emerged from the data was that half of the Indigenous ECR participants were employed in a different institution to the one in which their doctoral qualification was conferred. This might suggest a missed opportunity for many institutions to convert their Indigenous doctoral graduates into academic positions within their organisation. There could be several reasons underpinning this, including but not limited to a possible lack of institutional foresight and/or else concern for Indigenous doctoral graduate's career progression. Many Indigenous ECRs also indicated that the level and type of support available to assist in developing their research careers was significantly reduced in comparison to what had been made available to them as doctoral candidates.

Figure 1. Needs of Indigenous early career researchers.

> There's been a lot of focus on PhD students, but then you get to being an early career and you're just left to your own devices. (Hannah)

> Most of the support that's given is for HDR students and then once you pass that, it's like you're dropped off the end of a cliff. (Eva)

An additional comment made by Eva alludes to an expectation that ECRs understand the research space and that they know how and where to seek information and/or support they require. The use of the term *secret* suggests that participation as an early career researcher is stymied as a result of hidden or privileged information that is not necessarily shared or available to new ECRs.

> I think being an Early Career Researcher has a number of hidden secrets and I don't know, like even protocols and things that researchers know about. Early Career Researchers are

expected to find them out by themselves. There are secrets that every Early Career Researcher should get to know. (Eva)

This point is particularly pertinent to Indigenous ECRs, as many expressed feelings of isolation due to the low number of Indigenous academics in their faculties and/or institutions. Further to accessing guidance and support, Julie and Maree advocated the responsibility of universities to develop pathways that enable academic career progression for Indigenous ECRs. Sarah specifically noted that successful pathways begin during PhD candidature and should address issues associated with the precarity of positions dependent solely on securing research funding.

> Let's build it all the way up – from PhD all the way up and let's have people at every level. I think that – things like they did with making my position permanent is – and where it can't just – not just on – tied to grant funding or something where I have to leave in three years' time and that's best practice because again it shows commitment. (Sarah)

While individual experiences across the cohort varied, there was a belief that genuine commitment to the development of Indigenous ECRs across the higher education sector is substantially lacking. In particular, 14 Indigenous ECRs used the terms *lip service* and or *ticking boxes* in reference to their own experiences of institutional support for Indigenous research and/or the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledges.

> I think that universities, Australian universities, pay lip service to Indigenous staff, both academic and professional. I see that they want to use Indigenous Knowledges when it suits them, when it's okay and when it's acceptable based on – non-Indigenous students are happy with – to have it or not. But in terms of developing Indigenous post-grad students in their early stages of their career, no I think it's – yeah. I would be surprised if any university has got a really good approach. Maybe there are universities that are doing better, but, I think, as a whole the sector is really poor. It's sub-standard. (Cate)

> The university doesn't – it does, it pays lip service to this kind of thinking, but unless it sees dollars for its own continuity, I don't think it gives a shit. That could be just me, but I think that plays out in – it puts boundaries around the type of research that Indigenous researchers might be wanting to engage with. (Wirraga)

It may appear from the comments above that Indigenous ECRs participating in this project have little faith in the system. However, the reality is that each one is actively engaged in the institution in which they are employed and is committed to working towards building stronger pathways to increase the capacity and number of Indigenous researchers, as well as effecting positive change in Indigenous communities.

> It's not about the promotion, so much as oh, wow, wouldn't it be great to be a DVC or something. Whereas, that would be great, the other real positive thing is that commitment to community, where if I've got these positions or if I could attain a position like that, and I can maintain my connection and my responsibility to community, I can be a voice for Indigenous students and staff and actually have some sway in how things go in universities and how the university actually contributes to the wider community as an institution over and above. (James)

> Well, I'm in a position that I absolutely love at the moment. I hope to build and grow this degree program. So, what's my aspirations? It would be just to continue this position but actually, yeah, follow through with some of the ideas and some of the expansions and – what is the word? Just develop this program to be successful. It is – it has – will have incredible [Indigenous] alumni from this program. (Olive)

In order to effect positive change for Indigenous students and communities, Indigenous ECRs expressed a desire to receive support and guidance from Indigenous mentors and/ or senior advisors. It was believed that Indigenous academics could assist Indigenous ECRs in transitioning into the early career phase and assist in the development of strategic pathways that recognised both institutional and Indigenous community expectations.

Indigenous academic mentors

Indigenous ECRs noted a variety of people who provided formal and/or informal academic mentorship. Susan and Skywalker identified the value in having access to other academics who understand what a successful research trajectory requires. However, the ability to seek support and guidance from an Indigenous academic who holds an equivalent or more senior position to their own was considered of great benefit to establishing and developing a successful career in research.

> My immediate supervisor is an Aboriginal woman and her and I worked really well together last year with another Aboriginal man who's since moved on to doing other things. But we still connect with him because he understands the work. So having those two people as support within that space, within the institutional space is of huge importance to me and not just for what they give with regards to the university and all the inner workings of that but what they give in terms of culture and just friendship and you know, it's a wonderful thing to have. They understand where I'm coming from which makes a huge difference. (Martha)

In contrast to Martha's experience, many Indigenous ECRs expressed feelings of isolation and burdensome workloads due to a low number of Indigenous academics in their faculties and/or institutions. In addition, 50% of Indigenous ECRs were faced with the added challenge of seeking out new Indigenous mentors as a result of moving from one institution to another. Julunybarr and Cooper shared their challenges associated with moving away from an institution or organisation where they felt understood and supported.

> So, when you move from one institution to another, you lose the capacity to have someone that might tuck you under their wings. (Julunybarr)

> It's the academic culture is very different to community and I don't think people in academia realise [laughs] how different, very different it is. (Cooper)

Similarly, Rhiannon, Susan and Sasha specifically spoke about challenges associated with learning different institutional systems and establishing themselves into a completely different faculty, where the balance of Indigenous to non-Indigenous academics and the level of support available and/or offered was often very different to the institution or faculty they moved from. In some cases Indigenous ECRs reported that they found little to no support in the new appointment and as a result felt isolated and disheartened by the move.

> I feel it's an institution where it's sink or swim. There has been no induction. It's, here's the key to your office; if you have any problems ring the IT, here's the number for the IT. That's basically it. (Teal Dhakki)

> Anyway, within the university I feel like I've reached out as much as I can but there should be other things too. There should be support for not only new staff but new Indigenous staff that just wasn't – neither of those were there, or I didn't get it if it was. (Rhiannon)

These types of experiences appeared to be associated with the fact that the Indigenous ECRs were either the only Indigenous academic employed in their faculty or else had little to no interactions with other Indigenous academics employed in the same institution. While Indigenous ECRs shared some examples of positive experiences with non-Indigenous mentors and/or colleagues, they also demonstrated a strong desire for Indigenous academic mentors who understand and have experienced the challenges associated with navigating the academy as an Indigenous person.

> I really struggle with saying it, but for me personally I would really like an Aboriginal mentor, because there's just stuff that I have to encounter that other people don't encounter. Trying to get around it is really challenging. (Lee)

> Now, I need help navigating the Western academic system as an Aboriginal person and knowing when to disengage from that system and when to – how to get the two to co-exist. (Sarah)

Indigenous academic mentors were also identified as necessary to guiding Indigenous ECRs in developing a career trajectory that is relevant to the roles and responsibilities of research conducted by and for Indigenous people. Areau shared a two-pronged issue resulting from the underrepresentation of Indigenous academics and a lack of understanding of Indigenous research which impacts the ability to build on her research trajectory.

> But now I'm in a position where I'm one of the most senior Indigenous people in the space, the non-Indigenous academics don't understand my career trajectory.

Areau explained that they found the expectation to bring Indigenous perspectives in her faculty difficult, and that in response she had sought advice from Indigenous women scholars from other institutions over zoom meetings, who:

> Offered their time for free across the country, to talk to them structurally about how Indigenous education was fitting inside their university, what were the challenges that they found and what worked for them.

Interestingly, just under half (14) of the Indigenous ECRs who participated in this study hold positions at Level C or higher. Furthermore, six of these Indigenous ECRs disclosed that they are the only senior Indigenous academic in their faculty, if not the institution. Irrespective of the current positions held by the participants in this project, each one formally meets the academic definition of an ECR. However, they often found themselves burdened by non-Indigenous academics with additional culture-related expectations that impinged on their time to conduct their own research and produce publications on which to build research career trajectories.

While Indigenous ECRs, including Carol, Mica and Riley, identified a desire to access the support of senior Indigenous academic mentors, half of our cohort commented on the small number of senior Indigenous academics within their institutions. As a result, Indigenous ECRs shared their discomfort of further burdening senior Indigenous

academics who are already in high demand and whose positions may or may not include Indigenous ECR mentoring.

> There's like, oh well, go and see that [Indigenous] Professor. Well, that Professor is never there. He's the go to person for everybody. You have to try and – so you don't – you feel like you're taking up other people's time because they're not paid [unclear]. They're not – it's not in their workload allocation. (Patricia)

> My [Indigenous, PhD] supervisors, I still reach out to them and ask them things and they – but the thing is they're now not paid to be – they're not paid to answer me now. It's not that they don't answer me; it's just that I'm aware that they're not paid to answer me, and so I don't reach out as much as I'd like to, mainly because I don't want to be a pain and overuse them. (Rhiannon)

Other Indigenous ECRs, including Eli, Julie, Martha and Susan, also noted that it is unrealistic and unfair to expect senior Indigenous academics to be constantly available to mentor Indigenous ECRs on top of their own position workloads and research responsibilities. Clearly this demonstrates a tension between the desire to be mentored and the awareness that this adds to the well-documented burden. As a result, it is necessary to consider additional sources of support that Indigenous ECRs identified as important and valuable to their development.

Indigenous colleagues and networks

In light of the under-representation of Indigenous academics at the senior level (Coates et al., 2021; Trudgett et al., 2020), Indigenous ECRs also expressed aspirations to collaborate and network with other Indigenous colleagues. The reasoning behind this was again to engage with academics in the academy who were like minded and understood the challenges of being an Indigenous academic.

> I need Indigenous academics who are actually experiencing what I'm experiencing, and there does not seem to be any sort of network or a networking, within the Indigenous academic base. (Eli)

In response to a question about creating a model of best practice to develop Indigenous ECRs, Julie spoke about providing opportunities for Indigenous ECRs to connect across disciplines to broaden their research focus and as a conduit to support one another in a culturally responsive way.

> Opportunities also for them [Indigenous ECRs] to network right across the university, rather than just be stuck in their silos, because there's some amazing stuff that happens with interdisciplinarity within institutions as well. You might be wanting to work in a project, but you don't know anyone in sciences that are working in that field. So, there's those sorts of broader networking, and just a chance for everyone to yarn and actually connect, and often talk through, well, I'm having a problem with this. There's that sort of opportunity for them to share and problem solve together as well. (Julie)

Other Indigenous ECRs expressed a desire to be part of or even build their own Indigenous research teams. James, Sasha and William all spoke of the value of working in an environment which included a community of Indigenous academics. In such an environment Indigenous ECRs have access to Indigenous colleagues who are knowledgeable

about academic processes and protocols, and they are more able to share the load and support one another in raising Indigenous voices within the academy. James noted that working in a faculty with all Indigenous academics is where they are most comfortable, while Susan advocated for one or more Indigenous centres on university campuses to build a critical mass of Indigenous academics and to create an organisational structure that would withstand staff turnover.

Indigenous Elders and community

Indigenous ECRs shared examples which demonstrated a lack of understanding about the cultural and community responsibilities and protocols of research involving Indigenous Peoples.

> The academy don't understand community in the same kind of way so they don't see it as that constant teaching and learning that our community mentors, that our community engages with, that our Elders expect of us; that we would pass on our knowledge. There's no point me having done 20 years of this work if I can't pass it on to other Aboriginal people. What have I been doing? So, they're the kinds of philosophical spaces that you find you are continually trying to stretch yourself. (Areau)

Two Indigenous ECRs shared specific examples of lessons learned by non-Indigenous colleagues in regard to engaging and being led by Indigenous people and Elders on Indigenous research projects.

> I did a research project a couple of years ago and had a couple of people come along with me to meet a particular Auntie and they thought it was going to be half an hour and I'm there going no, it's whenever Auntie's had enough of us, we're out of there. So about four hours later, off we wandered. (Shaun)

> The funny part of the fun part is when you start a project with say, non-Aboriginal researchers, which I've just done recently, so sort of the narrative there is that they're doing a bunch of stuff and normally they would go about it in a really, just done, done, done, get that done and we know we can be done by this milestone. But it comes to the blackfella stuff now and I'm saying that's – I'm telling you, that ain't going to work. So, we have a go at it, and they realise it's not going to work and of course that blows our timeframes even more because they've got to go back and do things. (Skywalker)

Most importantly is the level of accountability that Indigenous ECRs expressed to reciprocating the knowledge, strength and support that they receive from their Elders and communities. This demonstration of respect and appreciation toward Indigenous Elders and community is another example of an integral difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies.

> Yeah, like some of the Elders they give me a growl [scolding] because they can see things differently and so I take that on board. So – but it's got to have those components because I want to be able to make the mistakes to learn from them and that's just as important as the supportive positive affirmations that you do get. (Henry)

> I gain as much from talking to my PhD student who's actually an Elder of my Country in my community. So, she's giving me a whole heap of engagements and wonderful relational information about culture and I'm talking to her about research and we're sharing. It's a really lovely connection to have. (Martha)

> I would like to be able to utilise the research that I've done and work with our communities and I'd like to work in an Indigenous team that's strong where it's Indigenous focused and we're engaging with our communities in meaningful ways. (Areau)

Similar comments shared by most of our participants evidenced a need to better enable Indigenous ECRs to effect change for Indigenous Peoples within the academy and in their communities. Critically, Indigenous ECRs demonstrated their respect for cultural protocols and commitment to Indigenous self-determination.

Safe spaces to meet and collaborate

For Indigenous ECRs to gain support and guidance from Indigenous academic mentors, Indigenous colleagues, Indigenous Elders and/or community members, it is necessary to provide opportunities in which to yarn, meet and collaborate. This was summed up by William who said:

> I want to hear what [Indigenous scholar #1] does. I want to hear what [Indigenous scholar #2] is doing, but I also want to see what's happening at [university #3], and I want to be able to talk about what we're doing, in a friendly environment where people look for collaboration amongst Indigenous scholars.

Due to the challenges of distance and of the current pandemic, some Indigenous ECRs suggested the creation of virtual/online communities would enable access to and collaboration with like-minded researchers. Eva suggested that a biennial online Indigenous ECR networking forum could be of benefit to develop ECR skills such as writing papers for journals or applying for grants and ethics applications. Importantly, each Indigenous ECR who raised the need for collaborative spaces also indicated that any such space should be a safe space for Indigenous ECRs to connect and collaborate.

> I think that there's a real need in this country for a more collaborative approach to bringing Indigenous researchers together in a safe space. (Mica)

> It has to be safe because there's no – there's not a lot of places within universities that are safe for Indigenous people as staff or as students, as researchers. I think, that creating something where Indigenous or career researchers can make mistakes and say the wrong things, but it's okay. We're not going to be mocked or pointed out. (Cate)

The fact that 13 Indigenous ECRs shared examples in which they had experienced toxic environments that caused varying levels of stress and anxiety emphasises the need to ensure Indigenous ECRs are provided with physically and virtually safe spaces in which to further develop their skills, build collegial relationships and establish sound research career trajectories. This leads into the next section of the findings in which Indigenous ECRs provided insights and suggestions as to how higher education institutions could support the development of Indigenous ECRs. This is timely information given that a whole-of-university approach to developing Indigenous research strategies was encouraged in the 2020 *Indigenous Strategy Annual Report* (Universities Australia).

Recognition and respect

The final factor in supporting Indigenous ECR success is presented from an Indigenous perspective but relates to non-Indigenous students, staff and executive. The shared experiences of 30 Indigenous ECRs in this project clearly articulated a critical factor to enabling

the development of Indigenous ECRs. In an educational system that privileges Western epistemologies, it is essential that Indigenous Peoples and Knowledges are genuinely recognised for the contribution they make in building global academies. However, the crucial point made by Indigenous ECRs was that such contributions must not be measured in ways that only promote institutional or non-Indigenous academic reputations.

> So, I've been on committees where you've had a non-Aboriginal academic say, 'I'd really love to join your executive community because I have to tick the leadership box in my career and stuff, and it'll look really good if I work in this Aboriginal space'. There's just no – there's no value in that. (Martha)

Experiences shared by Indigenous ECRs demonstrated contradictions in the request for Indigenous contributions to curriculum content and research whilst at the same time positioning both the sought-after Indigenous knowledge and the knowledge holder as 'other'. In this way non-Indigenous knowledge and its owners remain unchallenged and the 'other' is left to compete on an uneven playing field.

> Being taken for granted and at the same time being taken as less than and tokenistic is all really hard. Building your credibility, I feel like I have to work 150 per cent. I have to work harder than everybody else. I also feel like I have to look really polished in a way that nobody else I work with does. (Sasha)

> So, there's little recognition for the seniority and the knowledge and work experience that we actually bring into the academy as Aboriginal peoples. That's a problem in and of itself. (Maree)

Most Indigenous ECRs participating in this project specifically identified a gap in the education of non-Indigenous staff in regard to Indigenous Knowledges and/or perspectives. This they identified as highly problematic to meeting university strategies and stated commitments of improving outcomes for Indigenous students, staff and communities. Conversely, in some instances this lack of knowledge and/or understanding did not necessarily afford Indigenous ECRs to be positioned as the expert or sought out to provide guidance in identifying or addressing issues.

> My key challenge is the white walls that I'm constantly having to come across, in that there are so many barriers and so many answers that you come across. You have non-Indigenous people being gatekeepers of what is knowledge and are not willing to look beyond their white lands and find ways in which other knowledges are just as valid, probably even more valid, than what has actually been done. (Eli)

This lack of knowledge and/or engagement with Indigenous Knowledges was viewed as a systemic issue that is perpetuated by a colonial academy. Consequently, Indigenous ECRs reported that non-Indigenous responses to Indigenous Knowledges and perspectives included, but was not restricted to, the homogenisation of Indigenous Peoples, indifference, and the exploitation of Indigenous Knowledges and/or peoples. Most concerningly, Indigenous ECRs provided examples of how they, or another Indigenous academic they know, were recruited onto a research project by a non-Indigenous academic who did not include the person in any consultations, data collection, ethics applications and/or publications. The fact that this was reported by Indigenous ECRs as not uncommon indicates that a systematic approach to challenging the marginalisation of Indigenous academics and knowledges in institutions is paramount.

Discussion

Position and positioning of Indigenous academics within the academy

The reality that Indigenous Peoples are under-represented in global academies that privilege Western knowledges means that Indigenous ECRs are differently positioned purely as a result of their Indigeneity (Andreotti et al., 2015; Naepi et al., 2020; Nakata, 2007; Pihama et al., 2018). However, this article goes beyond stating that Indigenous ECRs are differently positioned to problematising (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011) the realities that set them apart from their non-Indigenous colleagues.

Data from this study has shown that Indigenous ECRs were entrusted with both cultural and institutional roles and responsibilities, such as teaching and research. However, shared experiences and perspectives have evidenced the fact that despite institutional discourses of inclusion, the academy is indeed a contested space in which Indigenous and First Nations Knowledges are often marginalised (Nakata, 2006; Pihama et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2021). Critically, Indigenous ECRs reported examples in which their research career trajectories were ill considered, ill supported and/or undermined by non-Indigenous academics and the institutions in which they were employed. This position is supported by Indigenous and First Nations' literature reporting on the vacuous rhetoric of Indigenous equity in higher education (Kidman & Chu, 2017; Pihama et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2021; Thunig & Jones, 2020).

Data that showed fifty per cent of Indigenous ECRs were employed in a different institution to the one in which their doctoral qualification was conferred raises questions as to the commitment of institutions to addressing inequities. As global academies are underpinned by Western and neoliberal values of competitiveness and success (Naepi et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2021), inclusion becomes conditional on providing an Indigenous presence that does not unsettle or disrupt the status quo (Andreotti et al., 2015; Bunda et al., 2012; Pihama et al., 2018).

This was evidenced in Indigenous ECR examples of and references to *lip-service* and *box ticking*, that are synonymous with tokenistic approaches to inclusion. Various Indigenous and First Nations' scholars challenge tokenistic approaches to inclusion and support the imperative that institutions fail to identify or address systemic marginalisation that greatly hinders the development and progression of Indigenous and First Nation careers (Fredericks, 2011; Naepi et al., 2020). Experiences shared by Indigenous ECRs participating in this study provided examples of the way in which Indigenous Knowledges and/or peoples are homogenised, treated with indifference and/or exploited for the benefit of the institution and/or non-Indigenous academics. This too has been documented in literature which states that the academy, *is further complicated by the knowledge that Māori academics are often used to tick boxes on proposals by academics who, consciously or not, do not have our personal career aspirations in mind* (Naepi et al., 2020, p. 149).

Thus it is critical that institutions commit to structural changes that align with Indigenous imperatives founded on the three core principles of an emancipation from colonial domination, political integrity in the representation of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies and the privileging of Indigenous voices (Nakata, 2007; Rigney, 2001). Anything less than this will only amount to the continuation of systemic barriers perpetuated by a colonial academy.

Conclusion

In this article the voices of Indigenous ECRs and literature authored by Indigenous and First Nations scholars are utilised to illuminate barriers and enablers impacting on the development of Indigenous ECRs in Australia. It is clear from the findings that despite having a responsibility to do so, universities are not adequately catering for Indigenous ECRs at present. The reality is that this cannot be left to the responsibility of Indigenous academics alone. Effective change requires investment and commitment throughout the higher education sector. Specifically, what is needed is a systematic approach where it is the responsibility of the faculties and senior executives to ensure appropriate mechanisms that align with Indigenous ways of knowing are in place.

Notes

1. In this article the terms *Indigenous* refer to Australian Indigenous Peoples and *First-Nations* refers to Indigenous Peoples from countries other than Australia.
2. We have used the term 'early career researchers' as it highlights the research trajectory the participants have been on and promotes them as bon fide researchers. However, we recognise that another acceptable term would be 'early career academics'.
3. The Australian higher education system comprises of five main levels of academic appointment; Level A being the entry level position which often is associated with the title Associate Lecturer through to Level E being the more senior position which has the title Professor.

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