

On higher ground

Gone are the days when indigenous Australians could climb the employment ladder without postgraduate qualifications. Competition for the top jobs in universities and government departments is hotting up as growing numbers of indigenous people enter the workforce armed with masters and PhD qualifications, says Professor Peter Read, a senior research fellow at the Australian National University's National Centre for Indigenous Studies.

Statistics reveal a steady increase in the number of indigenous people undertaking postgraduate study, although participation rates are no where near as high as among non-indigenous students. Figures from the National Indigenous Postgraduate Association show that in 2004, there were 1224 indigenous postgraduate students in Australian universities. They made up 0.7 per cent of the overall domestic postgraduate student population. And, perhaps surprisingly, growth in indigenous

postgraduate participation between 2002 and 2004 was stronger than among undergraduates.

Read says the major challenge – aside from financial constraints – in getting indigenous people to undertake higher study is convincing them it will be worthwhile for career development.

“We say to people who may be in their 30s: ‘At the moment as an indigenous person you may get to run a government department without a PhD, but you’ll find that more and more Aboriginal people are coming forward with PhDs and being very competitive in a way that they aren’t now,” Read says. “And with indigenous lecturers, the path to becoming a senior lecturer and even professors without a PhD is still possible.” But, warns Read, it won’t stay this way as a wave of indigenous PhDs start coming through.

While higher qualifications might yield enormous benefits in terms of earning capacity in the long-term, the short-term financial implications are still daunting

and prohibitive. Read says there are postgraduate scholarships available, but the typical \$17,500 offered is simply not enough – many potential students are aged in their 30s or 40s with families to support and they often have to live away from home to study. Scholarships usually need to be supplemented with further funding obtained through ARC grants or from other organisations to help fund the ‘living wage’ shortfall.

But hurdles can be overcome. The Indigenous Postgraduate Summer School, for example, has been a success. Professor Marcia Langton, chair of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne, describes the school as “boot camp for postgrads”. Devised in partnership with the Academy of Social Sciences Australia, it brings indigenous students from across Australia and their supervisors together for a week-long program involving discussions with prominent academics and a crash course in academic survival.



Samia Goodie

The program has been running for five years and a new partner, the Co-operative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, has come on board. About half of the participating students are undertaking studies in the health sciences area. Alumni are also returning to assist other students coming through.

The program gets financial support from companies and individuals, with the likes of the Pratt Foundation and

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