**SUPERVISING INDIGENOUS CANDIDATES**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Many Australian universities have introduced policies and practices to attract more candidates who identify as Aboriginal or as a Torres Strait Islander. This priority is partly motivated by the finding that Indigenous candidates in Australia are notably under-represented in university degrees, especially PhD or Masters by Research degrees: In Australia, Indigenous people represented 2.2% of the population but only 0.8% of research candidates. This priority is also motivated by the Research Block Grants, in which Indigenous candidates receive double the weighting of Indigenous candidates.

**Problems with supervision**

Yet, despite this attempt to attract more Indigenous candidates in Australia, the practices and behaviours of many research supervisors often diverge from the preferences of these candidates. For a variety of reasons, these practices and behaviours are not always sensitive to the values, perspectives, customs, and needs of Indigenous candidates. The following table outlines some of the causes of this discrepancy between the practices of research supervisors and the preferences of Indigenous candidates.

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| Common tendencies of Western supervisors | Common preferences of Indigenous candidates |
| **Decontextualized rationality**. Many Western universities prefer research that prioritizes objective conclusions—conclusions that are valid in all circumstances and thus independent of the culture or perspective of the researcher | **Contextualized knowledges**. Many Indigenous communities, as well as other collectivist nations, prefer research that prioritizes knowledges or perspectives that are relevant to their circumstances |
| **Detachment**. Because of this reverence towards objective conclusions, many Western universities encourage researchers to be detached from the people or circumstances they study. | **Engagement**. Many Indigenous candidates want to conduct research that is intimately connected to the needs and practices of their community. The community thus participates actively in the research. |
| **Independence**. Because many Western universities value detachment, they may not prioritize relationships. They want candidates to learn skills and manage their projects as independently as possible | **Relationships.** Many Indigenous candidates prioritize relationships—including relationships with supervisors. They want to develop trusting, respectful, and mutual relationships with supervisors. |
| **Imposition of one perspective**. To foster independence, many Western supervisors impose a set of guidelines that candidates should follow. These guidelines imply that all candidates should follow a particular set of approaches. | **Autonomy to explore multiple knowledges**. Many Indigenous candidates do not want supervisors to impose one Western perspective. Instead, they want to be granted the autonomy to utilize multiple perspectives, including Indigenous knowledges. |

This document helps academics, especially non-Indigenous academics, supervise Indigenous candidates. Despite the vast heterogeneity of Indigenous candidates in Australia, some principles and practices are often useful.

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| **Supervision panel** |

Who should supervise Indigenous candidates? Which skills, expertise, or experiences should these supervisors have accrued? To what extent do candidates benefit if research supervisors are Indigenous? The candidates and supervisors both need to contribute to these decisions. The following table outlines some of the key considerations, as derived from past research on this topic.

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| Principle | Details |
| **Indigenous supervisors.** Many Indigenous candidates prefer one or more of their supervisors to be an Indigenous academic. Nevertheless, several alternatives can offset this need. | * Rather than an Indigenous academic from the university, many Indigenous candidates prefer a member of the community they want to study to supervise instead—regardless of whether this person is strictly eligible according to university policies; the community will often help choose this person * If their project does not revolve around Indigenous matters, individuals are not usually as concerned about whether one of their supervisors is an Indigenous academic * Some universities employ few Indigenous academics; therefore, Indigenous candidates may not be able to locate someone who is both an Indigenous academic and an appropriate supervisor. Candidates tend to prioritize the quality of supervisors over whether they are Indigenous. |
| **Informed supervisors.** Many Indigenous candidates prefer that all their supervisors are informed about Indigenous communities. Non-Indigenous supervisors who have attained a high degree of cross-cultural competence are perceived favourably. Yet they also prefer supervisors who explicitly recognize the limitations of this knowledge—called cultural humility | * These candidates would like supervisors to understand the history and implications of colonization * These candidates would like supervisors to appreciate existing customs and values—especially customs and values that could impinge on their research practices * These candidates tend to reject Western supervisors who position themselves as Indigenous experts—because this label is reminiscent of colonization and racism (Henry, 2007) |
| **Diverse supervisors.** Some Indigenous candidates prefer supervisors who are members of minority demographics | * These supervisors are likely to share some perspectives in common, such as understanding feelings of exclusion and discrimination |
| **Other demographic preferences**. Some Indigenous candidates prefer supervisors who belong to specific demographics. | * For example, if their project revolves around gendered issues, they might prefer a supervisor of their sex whenever possible. |

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| **Interactions between supervisors and candidates** |

Like all research candidates, supervisors should develop a relationship of mutual trust and rapport with Indigenous candidates. Yet, as the following table shows, some features of the relationship may be especially important to Indigenous candidates.

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| Principle | Details |
| **Encourage the Use of Indigenous Knowledges.** Research supervisors should encourage, but do not oblige, Indigenous candidates to utilize Indigenous knowledges in their thesis. | Supervisors should   * indicate they believe these candidates should utilize Indigenous knowledges—especially the knowledges of their community * reveal they can identify examiners who will embrace, rather than reject, these knowledges * carefully, but enthusiastically, ask questions about Indigenous knowledges—and thus learn from the candidate, fostering a more egalitarian rather than hierarchical relationship |
| **Grant autonomy but clarity**. Supervisors should not impose their ideologies and perspectives on candidates, including Indigenous candidates. Nevertheless, they should not expect candidates to be entirely autonomous either. | To balance this autonomy with clarity, supervisors should   * describe the methods or practices they would use—and then ask the candidates the methods or practices their communities would apply instead * ask the candidates to clarify the topics on which they would like guidance and the topics in which they would like more independence |
| **Learn about Indigenous culture**. Supervisors should actively attempt to extend their knowledge and understanding of Indigenous culture—especially about the communities in which their candidates identify | * invite, but not oblige, Indigenous candidates to discuss the customs, practices, values, and rules of their community * complete courses about Indigenous culture—but especially courses that promote humility rather than conceit * contemplate the effects of power and colonization |
| **Communicate naturally but mindfully**. Supervisors should interact with Indigenous candidates like they would interact with any candidates: naturally but respectfully. Nevertheless, they should be mindful of some behaviours that could be misconstrued | For example   * many Indigenous candidates do not like to be praised in front of other people; they prefer modesty * supervisors should be mindful that Indigenous candidates may also prefer modesty in attire as well |

Supervisors cannot develop knowledge and understanding of Indigenous communities swiftly. Nevertheless, Appendix A1 briefly outlines some of the historical underpinnings of colonisation.

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| **Accommodate challenges** |

The PhD and Masters by Research is challenging to many candidates. Indigenous candidates often experience additional challenges. The following table outlines some common challenges as well as some possible responses to these challenges. Appendix A2 outlines some of the customs and practices of Indigenous communities that might clarify the origin of these challenges.

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| Challenge | Response |
| **Pressure to succeed.** Some Indigenous candidates feel pressure to succeed—because they feel that failure could be projected onto the entire community | * Indicate that candidates often underestimate their capacity to develop the skills and qualities they need to succeed during their candidature; consequently, these candidates are not as likely to doubt their capabilities |
| **Timelines.** Indigenous researchers often need to dedicate significantly more time to community engagement, especially early in the project | * The traditional schedule of PhD milestones may not be suitable for these candidates * As a supervisor, you could justify alternative schedules and milestones to university administrators * Inspire these candidates to develop skills—especially writing skills—as early as possible. Consequently, they might be able to complete the final phases of research more efficiently than many other candidates |
| **Diverging definitions of research.** Definitions and beliefs about research—such as the role of research—often differ between Western academics and Indigenous communities | * Demonstrate your awareness that definitions of research vary across communities * Indicate that your role is to locate an examiner that embraces this diversity of research |

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| **Choose suitable examiners** |

Indigenous candidates are often concerned that faceless examiners will dismiss Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous methods. Both supervisors and candidates, therefore, are reluctant to include Indigenous perspectives. Consequently, supervisors need to choose suitable examiners. The following table outlines the principles supervisors should apply to achieve this goal

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| Principle | Details |
| Obviously, if possible, choose an examiner who has worked in Indigenous communities and embraces as well as demonstrates understanding of Indigenous values, knowledges, and methods | Nevertheless, some of these examiners forge specific beliefs about Indigenous knowledges and methods—and, therefore, can be particular and pedantic. To circumvent this problem   * do not choose inexperienced academics; inexperienced academics often grade theses harshly * likewise, do not choose academics who have only recently started to conduct research in Indigenous communities; these academics may overestimate their knowledge * prioritize examiners who continue to apply a variety of Indigenous and non-Indigenous methods and, therefore, can accept conflicting perspectives |
| Consider whether or not the examiners should be indigenous. | Past research, however, indicates that   * Indigenous examiners are not necessarily more receptive to diverse Indigenous knowledges—and can be more particular at times * Some conservative academics tend to respect a thesis more that was examined by at least one or two non-Indigenous examiners; whether the candidate wants to cater to this prejudice is a personal choice * For political reasons, candidates sometimes prefer examiners who are not Australian. They might also prefer to conceal their Aboriginal identity from the examiners to guarantee the evaluations are fair |

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| **Other considerations** |

To assist Indigenous candidates, universities can also introduce a range of other initiatives. For example, they can

* organize communities of Indigenous candidates to assist one another
* modify their instructions to examiners, underscoring the importance of situated knowledges of the candidate and methods that are negotiated with the community in advance
* develop a database of Indigenous research supervisors within and outside the institution.

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| **Appendix A1: History of colonisation** |

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| History of colonisation | |
| Before European colonization, Aboriginal communities traded with many cultures overseas | * These communities include the Makassans from the 1700s—primarily form Sulawesi, Indonesia—as well as Papuan expeditions |
| European theories about Aboriginal communities justified discrimination and limited access to services and education | These theories—theories that are rejected and derided now but were common in the early 1900s—include   * The noble savage theory, in which explorers such as Cook perceived Aboriginals as people who do not live in a civilization and are happy as a consequence * Great chain of being theory, in which individuals assume that people vary in some hierarchy, from god at the top to Indigenous individuals at the bottom * Social Darwinism that assumed that Aboriginal communities will eventually decline because of inferiority to adapt |
| Until the 1960s, Aboriginal individuals needed permits for minor rights | * These rights include the right to marry and work |
| In 1901, management of Aboriginal people was assigned to the Commonwealth | * Thus, Aboriginal people could not freely accrue wealth |
| In 1914, official policies prohibited Indigenous Australians from serving in the military. Yet, at this time, approximately 800 Aboriginal people enlisted to fight in World War I. | * The restrictions were increasingly relaxed because Australia needed to recruit more personnel. |
| The Coniston massacre in 1928, in Central Australia, was one of the last sanctioned massacres of Indigenous Australians—in particular the Warlpiri, Anmatyerre, and Kaytetye peoples. | * The massacre was revenge in response to the murder of a dingo hunter in the region * Although official records indicate that only 17 Aboriginal people were killed, other estimates indicate the number exceeded 100. Indeed, Warlpiri, Anmatyerre, and Kaytetye peoples estimate that 170 individuals were killed, including children. |
| In the 1930s, governments shifted from segregation to assimilation | * Assimilation underpinned the stolen generation. |
| In 1962, Aboriginal individuals were first permitted to vote |  |
| In 1967 was the referendum to permit Aboriginal individuals to be counted in the census | * 90% of the population approved this change |
| In 1975, initiatives were implemented to encourage more autonomy in Aboriginal individuals | * The Aboriginal Development Commission and then ATSIC helped Aboriginal people start businesses * In 1996, partly because of economic rationalization and other concerns, ATSIC was dismantled. |
| In 1992, the Mabo decision overturned the assumption of Terra Nullius | * This decision countered the assumption the land was, in essence, unoccupied before the first fleet. |
| Only 20 existing Aboriginal languages are not in danger of extinction | * About 130 Aboriginal languages are in danger of extinction; in the late 18th century, between 350 to 750 languages were spoken |

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| **Appendix A2: Features of Indigenous culture that could help supervisors understand candidates** |

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| Features of many Indigenous communities | |
| Beliefs and practices | Details |
| **Spiritual beliefs and education** |  |
| Often assume that ancestral spirits rose from the earth and fell from the sky to form the land | * Before these spirits—or creation ancestors—shaped the world as we perceive the globe now is the period called the Dreamtime * These spirits are assumed to be ancestors of modern Indigenous peoples |
| These spirits are frequently assumed to energize all animals, plants, and natural forces | * Consequently, Indigenous peoples will tend to treat all animals, plants, and landforms with respect—and perceive all these animals, plants, and landforms as interconnected |
| Besides shaping the lands, these ancestral spirits determined how people need to behave to maintain the world—sometimes called The Law | * The Law clarifies the responsibilities each person must fulfill towards other people, the country—including animals, water, and land—and the spirits themselves |
| These spiritual beliefs shape sorry business—that is, the rituals around death and burial | * Individuals cannot refer to a person who has died for a certain period of time * They must engage in rituals to enable their spirit to continue on its journey. * Otherwise, the spirit may return to disrupt the family |
| A variety of formats are used to convey this knowledge to children. When boys and girls enter adulthood, they participate in many important ceremonies; they hear songs and stories about how they are connected to the ancestral beings | * These formats include dance, painting, art, song, and story * Hence, Indigenous individuals sometimes prefer modes of education that differ from Western practices—including action rather than only auditory or visual learning methods |
| **Identity** |  |
| The notion of Aboriginal identity is complicated and sensitive | * Sometimes, definitions of who is Aboriginal correspond to many sensitive policies, such as historical concerns about mixed races and receipt of welfare. * Consequently, some people might be offended if asked to indicate the degree to which they are Indigenous * We now tend to define someone as Aboriginal if they are descended from an Aboriginal community, identify as Aboriginal, and are accepted by an Aboriginal community |
| Australia comprises 500 Indigenous nations, each with distinct borders. | * Each nation comprises clans, and each clan comprises families. |
| Kinship clarifies the responsibilities of people to other individuals and to the universe | * Three levels of kinship guide individuals: moiety, totem, and skin names. |
| According to Moiety systems, everything including people is split into two halves that mirror one another. | * To illustrate, according to Yolnu, the spiritual ancestors assigned everything in the universe to either the Dhuwa or the Yirritja Moiety * The black cockatoo is Dhuwa; the white cockatoo is Yirritja, for example. * The two Moieties complement each other in ceremonies, marriage, and daily life * People who are assigned the same Moiety are considered siblings and, therefore, cannot marry one another but are obliged to support each other. |
| In many Aboriginal communities, individuals are assigned four or more totems that defines their identity, role, and place in the group. They receive a totem that represents their nation, clan, family, and themselves. | * Each totem is often assumed to be a descendent of a spiritual ancestor * In many communities, individuals cannot eat their totems usually—such as birds, reptiles, and fish * During pregnancy, the unborn child will be identified with the spirit of this location—because this spirit is assumed to energize the child—and this spirit determines the totem. * Totems are balanced across Moieties. Members of one Moiety might protect an animal; members of another Moiety might eat or use the animal. |
| Skin names represents a person’s blood line—comparable to a surname in one sense. | * Each nation might assign a cycle of 16 to 32 names * To illustrate the assignment of skin names, if a mother with one skin name births a child, this child is assigned the second skin name—and all other children with this skin name are considered siblings. Their children are assigned the third skin name and so forth until they cycle to the first skin name. * Often, elders are not especially old * In many communities, great grandparents are treated like sons and daughters—and thus cared for, showing the cyclical process |
| **Social norms** |  |
| Partly because Indigenous communities are often more communal, the social norms in these communities frequently differ from the social norms of more individualistic, mainstream societies | In many Indigenous communities   * people tend to prefer and to ask indirect questions rather than blunt, direct questions * silence during conversations is not uncommon and does not imply disinterest * people may feel ashamed when praised in front of other individuals * the stereotype that Indigenous people avoid eye contact does not apply to all individuals or communities |
| Decisions are often reached by consensus | * Therefore, the community may not be able to reach a decision in a specific meeting because key individuals may not have attended |