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Success and University for Indigenous Students: A Review of Higher Education in Australia

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Abstract

This paper examines how well Higher Education (HE) meets the aspirations of Indigenous people in Australia, especially as reflected in the public policy discourse and its measurements of success. Through a literature review, the paper analyses current public policy and experiences of Indigenous students to identify the extent to which the HE system meets the needs of Indigenous people, especially those from remote areas. From a critical examination of the concept of success, the current limitations within HE are presented, and recommendations are made to help ensure that Indigenous Australians' aspirations and needs for HE are more firmly at the forefront of policy, design and delivery of HE in Australia.

Keywords

Indigenous Australian education policy, Decolonizing higher education, Indigenous knowledge and higher education, Higher education and Indigenous Australians, Indigenous student aspirations, Indigenous student success

Positionality

As a non-Indigenous Colombian mestizo pursuing a Ph.D., I recognize my privileged status arising from the opportunity to access a quality education. This privilege motivates my commitment to ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all students. My research centers on holistic approaches to education, social development, and human rights, with a particular focus on the role of HE in Indigenous communities of Colombia and Australia.

Recognizing my non-Indigenous identity, I am aware of the potential biases and perspectives it brings. Thus, to avoid taking the role of non-Indigenous judging observer, the research is underpinned by the need to recognise the Indigenous knowledge authorities and through a generative ground-up philosophy. Guided by three supervisors with extensive expertise in Indigenous studies, including a Warumungu Luritja woman, the research aims to explore how HE can support the aspirations of Indigenous communities while respecting and incorporating their cultural traditions and knowledge systems.

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Success and University for Indigenous Students: A Review of Higher Education in Australia

In 2007, the introduction of the 'Closing the Gap' framework by the Australian Government represented a major policy change in relation to Indigenous Peoples. This commitment between the Commonwealth, states, territories, and local governments was presented as a way to reduce Indigenous disadvantage and inequalities compared to the rest of Australia. Education has been a key target in reducing these inequalities, requiring all government levels to work together to ensure access from early childhood education to Higher Education (HE). However, one of the most important questions emerging from 'Closing the Gap' has been whether the strategy and subsequent public policies enable the self-determination of Indigenous Peoples or if Indigenous Peoples are being pushed towards a neo-assimilation policy to adopt Western values through mainstream cultural aspirations (Cooper, 2011).

Thus, this paper is oriented toward understanding the existing literature regarding Indigenous HE in Australia to identify whether HE public policy meets the needs of Indigenous people in terms of success, especially those from remote areas especially when analysing the discourse from public policy and its framing and measurements of success. This matter has been the subject of extensive research; however, due to the lack of advancement and, in some cases, a regression in progress, it warrants re-examination. A critical analysis of the concept of success is essential for evaluating the intentions behind HE for Indigenous students. Han (2015a) argues that in Western societies, success serves as a value proposition that distinguishes between individuals who achieve market-driven goals and those who do not, placing the burden of success on the individual as a form of control. Similarly, Street et al. (2022) found that success in Indigenous HE policy in the Northern Territory of Australia is tied to individual aspirations, such as securing employment, financial independence, and personal fulfilment. This suggests that HE policy continues to promote Western-centric values, despite the unique cultural contexts of Indigenous communities.

Western-centric values are reflected in the metrics used by HE to measure student success, serving as instruments of neo-assimilation and perpetuating settler-colonial ideologies by framing Indigenous students' aspirations and experiences within neo-colonial paradigms. In this context, Han's (2017) analysis of neoliberal governance as a device for social control offers a theoretical lens to examine HE policies as tools for disciplining Indigenous students through the precept of inclusion, grounded in an economic perspective that seeks to integrate them into the neoliberal market while neglecting their cultural needs. Similarly, Nakata's (2007) analysis of the cultural interface highlights the intersection of Western knowledge systems and Indigenous positions and experiences. His framework helps to explain how structural racism is deeply embedded in policy enactment.

This paper examines the existing literature on public policy, and experiences of Australian Indigenous students in HE. The aim is to highlight gaps in the discourse regarding whose interests HE serves. Beyond serving PhD research purposes, this paper is intended to contribute to the dialogue on decolonizing HE and promoting a model that respects Indigenous ways of learning and teaching, placing their worldview at the centre. This approach could benefit not only the Australian context but also other countries where Indigenous peoples encounter similar challenges with Western-centred education models and policies. The paper begins by providing a review of the literature regarding HE public policy drivers, intentions and enactment for Indigenous people before presenting the methods for exploring

the literature systematically to analyse the limitations within the current system, especially regarding assumptions about what success means to Indigenous people. The findings and conclusions of this review will then be presented in relation to Indigenous students' experiences, aspirations and success regarding HE, as well as the situation and experience of remote Indigenous students.

HE Public Policy Review

Milestones in Public Policy

The arrival of colonist settlers significantly transformed Indigenous education in Australia. Heffernan (2021) notes that settlers imposed the Western education system, leading to the establishment of non-Indigenous schools, primarily by missionaries and ex-convicts. This effort aimed to replicate English educational models while systematically excluding Indigenous knowledge. As a result, prior to the 1960s, access to education for Indigenous Australians was nearly impossible, with public policy focused on marginalizing Indigenous cultures (Wilks & Wilson, 2015). Education was often limited to basic literacy for children, and the curriculum devalued Indigenous cultural knowledge and languages, depriving them of their cultural identity and restricting educational opportunities (Wilson & Foley, 2013).

Since 1960, significant reforms have been aimed at improving Indigenous education in Australia. A pivotal moment came after the 1967 Referendum, which empowered the Australian government to develop and implement public policies addressing the needs of Indigenous Australians. This period paved the way for developing more inclusive policies, particularly concerning access to education and recognizing Indigenous Peoples' unique cultural identities (Wilson, K., & Wilks, J., 2015). Following this historical moment, in 1988, the Australian government introduced the *Dawkins White Paper* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1988), which reshaped the HE system by advocating for policies that recognize the cultural identities of Indigenous Australians while highlighting the importance of including disadvantaged populations to enhance the country's capacity to develop a highly skilled workforce.

In 1989, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989) was adopted to address and improve educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians, emphasizing the need to acknowledge and respect Indigenous cultures in the curriculum and pedagogical practices. According to Maxwell et al. (2018), the policy marked a significant shift towards acknowledging the needs of Indigenous students to enhance their engagement with the educational system. However, the policy documents did not adequately reflect the complex dynamics involving school agents, such as leaders and teachers, in deciding how to effectively implement the policy. Additionally, the policy failed to incorporate critical curriculum content on difficult topics identified by Indigenous Australians, such as the legitimacy of the Australian state and the ongoing impacts of systemic racism and settler colonialism (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Maxwell et al., 2018; St. Denis, 2011). Since then, the frameworks regarding HE for Indigenous students have remained stable, focusing on culturally appropriate practices, inclusive curricula, attendance, retention, and an increase in Indigenous teachers and academics (Vass, 2012)

In 2012, an expert panel presented the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes to the Australian Government, highlighting that Indigenous people remain significantly underrepresented in HE (Behrendt et al., 2012). The review called for developing qualified Indigenous professionals in leadership roles to help correct social disadvantages. It also emphasized the need for targeted research to enhance the success of Indigenous students (Gale & Parker, 2013; Gore et al., 2017). While the review marked a significant step in addressing Indigenous HE, its recommendations primarily adopt a quantitative approach despite acknowledging the necessity for qualitative insights into Indigenous students' specific needs. For instance, the review proposes population parity as a key measure of success, which continues to focus on quantitative metrics related to access, retention, and completion rates for Indigenous students (Gore et al., 2017; Pitman et al., 2017; Wilks & Wilson, 2015).

Additionally, in 2015 the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Strategy* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2015) was implemented to address inequalities Indigenous students faced in the education system. This strategy identified three key areas for action: enhancing leadership and workforce development, promoting cultural identity, and fostering effective partnerships (Street et al., 2017). Also, in the same year, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium (NATSIHEC) was established to replace the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Advisory Council. NATSIHEC was designed to increase Indigenous participation in the planning and executing public policies. Currently, it provides ministerial and governmental advice on matters related to Indigenous HE, ensuring that Indigenous perspectives are integrated into decision-making processes (Street et al., 2017).

Indigenous HE Policy drivers

The underrepresentation of Indigenous people in HE is a predominant theme in HE policy, particularly concerning enrolment, retention, and completion rates (Gore et al., 2017; Pitman et al., 2017; Sharrock & Lockyer, 2008; Smith et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2019; Wilks & Wilson, 2015). According to the reviewed literature, public policy emphasizes the necessity of focusing on increasing completion rates for Indigenous students while also acknowledging the importance of rising enrolments (Behrendt et al., 2012; Gore et al., 2017; Kippen et al., 2006; Sharrock & Lockyer, 2008; Trudgett et al., 2022). Consequently, HE public policy has been focused on quantitatively "*closing the gap*" to achieve statistical equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Pitman et al., 2017; Wilks & Wilson, 2015). While authors such as Wilks and Wilson (2015) and Pitman et al. (2017) note a significant increase in Indigenous student enrolments in recent decades, disparities persist between students from remote and regional areas compared to their urban counterparts. For instance, Jackson et al. (2023) indicates that enrolments of Indigenous students from regional and remote areas decreased slightly from 19.6% in 2008 to 19.2% in 2020. Furthermore, Smith et al. (2018) demonstrate that engagement in HE declines with increasing remoteness, highlighting that Indigenous students from these areas face lower completion rates and a higher likelihood of dropping out during their studies. Altman & Fogarty (2010) further indicate that the focus on economic outcomes usually overshadows the cultural significance of education for Indigenous communities, complicating these disparities.

HE policies tend to frame success through a lens of economic outcomes and market-driven goals, but this approach does not respond to what success means for Indigenous students. Wilks and Wilson

(2015) and Pitman et al. (2017) argue that achieving high enrolment, retention, and completion rates does not necessarily translate into a successful experience for Indigenous students. The focus on quantitative metrics fails to address deeper systemic issues such as racism, colonization, intergenerational trauma, and marginalization (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Grant-Smith & Irmer, 2022; Pyle et al., 2018). As a result, Indigenous student's cultural values and perspectives are usually sidelined in favour of Western perceptions of educational success.

According to the reviewed literature, the prevailing assumption among policymakers is that increasing Indigenous representation in HE will close the gap in key social indicators like employment, income, and access to social services (Fahey, 2021; Gore et al., 2017). However, Gale and Parker (2013) and Harwood et al. (2015) contend that Indigenous aspirations are often ignored, as policies are framed around Western definitions of success. This focus on economic outcomes does not adequately address the social and cultural disadvantages experienced by Indigenous Peoples (Behrendt et al., 2012; Gore et al., 2017). The exclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding limits the ability of HE to serve Indigenous communities in a meaningful and culturally relevant manner.

When analysed from Foucault's (2007) concept of 'governmentality,' Australian HE reveals how power is exercised through public policy to regulate Indigenous aspirations. Since the 1960s, HE policies have often employed a deficit-based approach that frames Indigenous students as lacking the necessary skills to be successful in education while failing to recognize their cultural strengths. Nakata (2024) notes that while Indigenous knowledge is often mentioned in HE policy, it is done superficially, reinforcing exclusion rather than fostering meaningful engagement with Indigenous epistemologies. This perpetuates a system where Indigenous students are forced to navigate HE landscapes that prioritize Western norms and values over their cultural frameworks.

Given this context, scholars such as Herbert (2010) and Sharrock & Lockyer (2008) emphasize the importance of self-determination in HE, aligning with the principles outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations General Assembly, 2007) which asserts that Indigenous Peoples' right to self-determination, allowing them to freely determine their political, economic, social, and cultural development. Behrendt et al. (2016) further argues that self-determination should ensure the involvement of Indigenous people in decision-making processes about the factors that affect their lives and communities, emphasizing the need for a decolonized approach to HE.

The Enactment of HE Policy: Limitations of Western Education Paradigms and Expected Outcomes.

The most common approach to improving the representation of disadvantaged groups in HE involves sustainable, holistic inclusion strategies through enabling programs. From a public policy perspective, Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson (2016) and Sarra (2014) emphasize early interventions with at-risk students, community-based programs, and supporting whole school cohorts to ensure retention and completion. While programs offering free tuition, academic preparation, and transition support have positively impacted enrolment and retention (Bexley, 2008; Pitman et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2015), their effect on completion remains unclear.

Street et al. (2018) suggest that HE has not only been formulated from a Western-based perspective but also for non-Indigenous policymakers who perceive Indigenous affairs as problems to be solved. This affects how evaluations and measurements of Indigenous student success in HE are framed. The Western-centred approach has created Indigenous information frameworks from external perspectives that do not represent the realities of Indigenous communities. Walter (2010) and Wilks & Wilson (2015) suggest that statistics are not impartial and, instead, represent dominant values that propose to 'fix' Indigenous problems. This approach creates success indicators that assume that successful Indigenous graduation outcomes are achieved by applying 'magic bullets' by implementing what seems effective (Taylor et al., 2019).

These perceptions regarding what Indigenous people must achieve to be considered successful in HE are shaped by the interaction between settler colonialism and the market-centred vision driven by neoliberal paradigms. According to Oldfield & Wilsher (2017) settler colonialism has been utilised to normalize the privileges and cultural practices of dominant groups, framing educational standards that emphasise market-oriented skills. This process reinforces ideological conformity and assimilation of Indigenous students through metrics such as attendance, engagement, and academic outcomes, which aim to integrate them into the settler economy.

Furthermore, the interaction between neoliberalism and settler colonialism has resulted in the perception of Indigenous cultures and languages as deficient. Consequently, educational approaches are designed to address these perceived deficiencies while displacing education objectives for equity and democratic citizenship (Lowitja Institute, 2018; McCallum & Waller, 2020; Wrench et al., 2022; Zyngier, 2011). Neoliberalism, in this context, acts as a mechanism for perpetuating colonial cultural and linguistic dominance by establishing educational standards aligned with market needs. These standards include language, culture, dress, values, social relations, financial abundance, and consumerism, all grounded in an individualistic and economic productivity approach (Davis, 2007).

According to Roberts & Mahtani (2010), these attributes are often seen as neutral and meritorious, serving as indicators of success. In this context, neoliberalism in education has promoted a 'knowledge-based economy,' which prioritizes human capital development based on market demands and capital accumulation (Jesop, 2018). Han (2015a) argues that individuals are compelled to optimize their own performance in the market, with success measured in terms of personal productivity and achievements. This model impacts Indigenous students in HE, who are expected to meet academic standards while navigating a system that undermines their cultural identities and often leads to burnout during their studies.

In this context, the Western paradigm assumes that success is achieved by reducing inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students; Indigenous students should reach the level of their non-Indigenous peers, which Biddle et al. (2018) and Grant-Smith and Irmer (2022) suggest does not necessarily work toward Indigenous wellbeing. The comparative approach homogenises the experience and expected outcomes of Indigenous students through a predefined definition of success. Hence, success and its measurements become a fundamental issue regarding cultural representations within HE because although public policies have adopted a self-determination and social justice discourse, the quantitative measurement to analyse Indigenous students' success is given by Western values. Street et

al. (2018) argue for example, that although the Western concept of success has been adopted by Indigenous people involved in the Northern Territory HE system, their own concepts of what success means remain important as part of understanding the role and effectiveness of HE. This means, for example, that success is not necessarily represented by individual achievements but also by the analysis of the impact that HE could have in their family and communities.

To include Indigenous culture within HE, Street et al. (2018) advocate for a flexible curriculum that reflects Indigenous ways of knowing. However, this integration presents considerable challenges, as Indigenous knowledge is frequently marginalized within the Western academic framework, leading to perceived conflicts with dominant pedagogical methodologies (Gore et al., 2017). Furthermore, Indigenous epistemologies are diverse and context-specific, complicating their incorporation into a standardized educational system (Street et al., 2020). As such, HE must respect the unique cultural identities of Indigenous students instead of imposing uniform standards.

To foster culturally appropriate education, it is essential to draw on local experiences and knowledge. Van Gelderen & Guthadjaka (2021) emphasizes an educational framework that promotes learning "through country," which facilitates a synergistic model integrating both Western and Indigenous pedagogies. This approach requires a critical re-evaluation of Western curricula and practices to prevent the perpetuation of hegemonic structures. Scholars such as Oldfield & Wilsher (2017) highlight that Indigenous knowledge can coexist with Western practices, thereby creating an inclusive environment that honours Indigenous perspectives and enhances the overall learning experience. However, deeper issues of inclusion remain, particularly the need to challenge the prevailing Western paradigm within the HE system. Durmush et al. (2021), Esposito (2019), and Arnold (2017) point out the difficulties Indigenous students face in navigating both Indigenous and Western worlds, stressing that HE must incorporate Indigenous cultural perspectives to foster a sense of belonging. While some Indigenous knowledge has been superficially integrated into HE, its core structures still reflect Western cultural dominance, underscoring the need for a shared space where Indigenous knowledge and epistemologies can be genuinely understood (Herbert, 2010).

The limitations of Western paradigms extend beyond HE, significantly impacting Indigenous Peoples' scholarship outcomes and shaping public policy aimed at 'closing the gap' through quantitative measures that prioritize mainstream employment as a key indicator of success. This emphasis on securing "real jobs" often ignores the unique needs and aspirations of Indigenous communities, particularly regarding self-determination (Craven & Dillon, 2013). Additionally, while metrics of educational success are frequently linked to individual economic prosperity, Street et al. (2017) argue that these measures usually do not align with Indigenous values, suggesting a disconnection between mainstream employment and community well-being. In the same way, Beder (2001) posits that employment serves as a validation of one's status within Western society, yet studies indicate that identity and the capacity for agency significantly influence Indigenous students' access to such opportunities (Guenther, 2021). Moreover, Staines (2022) emphasizes that challenges like limited job availability and transportation issues in remote communities exacerbate social disadvantage, underscoring the importance of allowing Indigenous communities to define what constitutes a "real job" within public policies.

Methodology

The paper aims to identify, through a review of the literature, current tensions in Indigenous HE in answer to the question of whether *HE public policy meets the needs of Indigenous people in terms of success, especially those from remote areas*.

This question is a key part of a Ph.D. study based on a comparative study to identify the role of HE in Australia and Colombia for remote Indigenous students, especially in terms of students' aspirations and 'success'. This paper exclusively focuses on the Australian context, examining the experiences of Indigenous Australians, particularly in remote areas. The paper understands remote Indigenous students as those who engage with daily life through non-Western epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies and for whom English is typically not the first language.

This paper conceptualizes remote Indigenous students as individuals who engage with daily life through non-Western epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies, typically for whom English is not the first language, while maintaining their mother tongue as the primary language. These students often experience a profound connection with Country, which highlights a biocultural well-being grounded in collectivist logics rather than neoliberal individualism (Poelina et al., 2023). This connection places remote Indigenous students in a complex position within HE, as the Western neoliberal context of HE fails to recognize the intricacies of human-environment relations (Wooltorton et al., 2022). Furthermore, it overlooks the holistic concepts that intertwine learning within remote Indigenous communities, where cultural well-being involves spiritual, environmental, ideological, political, social, economic, mental, and physical dimensions (Wooltorton et al., 2022).

The literature review employs a two-pronged approach to comprehensively scope and integrate both existing and emerging literature. Initially, a scoping review was conducted, guided by the JBI methodology (Joanna Briggs Institute, 2014). This approach utilizes a systematic and iterative process to identify and synthesize the breadth of literature on the topic (Thomas et al., 2017). It provides a mapping of the extent and nature of the literature while also highlighting omissions and gaps within the existing body of work (Peters et al., 2020). This method enables a thorough understanding of the current research landscape and identifies areas requiring further exploration.

Building on this, Indigenous Standpoint Theory was employed to evaluate the positionality of the research, asserting that knowledge is socially situated. Those from marginalized communities, such as Indigenous Australians, possess unique perspectives that reveal the limitations and biases of dominant Western frameworks (Nakata, 2007). As Nakata (2007) argues, Indigenous Standpoint Theory is not only about amplifying Indigenous voices but also about offering critical understandings into settler-colonial power structures, challenging and deconstructing its dominant paradigms.

Following this, an integrative review approach was employed, involving thematic synthesis to extract key concepts from the literature. This method critically analyzes and synthesizes the gathered literature, facilitating the generation of new insights on the topic (Thomas & Harden, 2008; Torraco, 2005). Once the main concepts were identified, Tribal Critical Race Theory was integrated to interrogate the racial and settler-colonial underpinnings of HE. As Brayboy (2013) emphasizes, colonization is not merely an

event of the past but an ongoing process that continues to shape the lives and experiences of Indigenous people, for the case of this paper, experiences within HE system. This approach not only addresses the gaps in existing literature but also prioritizes Indigenous cultural systems, making it useful for capturing the diverse experiences of Indigenous students in HE. Likewise, this methodology allows the researchers to provide accurate insights that align with Indigenous aspirations and definitions of success.

The literature considered in this review primarily includes academic papers, book chapters, and review articles that focus on HE provided to Indigenous students in Australia. This combined approach ensures a comprehensive examination and synthesis of the relevant literature. The sources analyzed were chosen from the last 15 years, making some exceptions when documents provided important historical context. In total, over 80 sources were analyzed. Searches through academic search portals were supplemented by any additional literature sourced from experts in the field of Indigenous HE and included grey literature. The main search term combinations were: 1) “higher education” or “university*” AND “Indigenous” or “First Nations” or “Aboriginal” AND “Success” or “Achievement, ;” 2) “higher education” or “university*” AND “Indigenous” or “First Nations” or “Aboriginal” AND “Aspirations” or “Desires;” 3) “higher education” or “university*” AND “Indigenous” or “First Nations” or “Aboriginal” AND “Barriers” or “Challenges;” 4) The same searches but specifying “Remote Indigenous” or “Remote First Nations” or “Remote Aboriginal.”

Thematic analysis

Indigenous Students' Experience of HE

As described previously, coming from an assimilation perspective to adopt a self-determination discourse, HE has been part of the political Indigenous students' inclusion strategy. However, the barriers within HE often burnout Indigenous students with experiences of social exclusion, acculturation stress, and risk to mental well-being (Hirano, 2014; Kanno & Varghese, 2010). For that reason, ensuring that HE addresses transformative change strategies to break the perpetuation cycle of inequities and disadvantages has become a challenge for HE (McArthur, 2021).

One of the greatest barriers in HE is racism because when inclusion strategies are being implemented within universities, racism undermines those efforts, making it difficult for Indigenous students to navigate the HE system properly (Kinnane et al., 2014). Durmush et al. (2021), for example, indicate that racism impacts the daily life of Indigenous students due to the perception that they receive “special treatment” which comes along with a regular questioning about student's indigeneity. Likewise, Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson (2016) suggest that, despite the considerably increasing enrolments of Indigenous students, there has been an increase in resistance regarding initiatives that stimulate the participation of those students in HE. That opposition has been described by Augoustinos et al. (2005) as part of the modern or new racism, which prioritizes “individual merit” over social disadvantages. However, according to Taylor et al. (2019) and Durmush et al. (2021), just a few universities have clear strategies to deal with the issue.

Another significant barrier Indigenous students face in HE is financial constraints. Kinnane et al. (2014) note that these challenges extend beyond tuition fees, encompassing childcare, transport, and

accommodation costs. The Behrendt Review (Behrendt et al., 2012) found that initiatives like *Abstudy*, which provides financial support for living costs, have positively impacted Indigenous participation in HE. However, more needs to be done to simplify access to financial support and to monitor the specific needs of Indigenous students. Financial assistance should also extend to those already in the workforce, as job conditions and family obligations can hinder their pursuit of further qualifications.

While the HE system has implemented various strategies to promote Indigenous inclusion, these often fall short when the educational framework is viewed in isolation. The Behrendt Review (Behrendt et al., 2012) highlighted the low Year 12 completion rates among Indigenous students, which impedes their ability to develop the necessary skills for university enrolment perpetuating a deficit-based approach in public policy. Additionally, Gore et al. (2017), Kelly et al. (2009), and Walker et al. (2008) found that Indigenous students often lack sufficient information about HE pathways after school. Compounding these issues, Gore et al. (2017) identified that the absence of culturally appropriate teaching contributes to a sense of disillusionment among Indigenous students, leading to decreased interest in pursuing education beyond compulsory schooling.

The complexity of HE structures and the lack of available information at universities is another barrier to overcome. Kinnane et al. (2014) claim that Indigenous Knowledge and Indigenous Education Units (IEUs), instead of promoting inclusion, sometimes create marginalization because often, these units are the 'go-to' for all Indigenous matters. In that way, it is usually expected that IEUs solve every single issue regarding Indigenous students' experience, which may prevent them from actively building relationships with lecturers as part of improving their learning experience. Kinnane et al. (2014) also highlights the lack of cultural competency among university staff members as a barrier and remind us that racism and assimilation practices persist despite universities' efforts to develop cultural competency. In this context, Indigenous students and their families must navigate a complex system that involves significant decision-making processes; however, the bureaucracy, meritocracy, and pressure for individual success stimulate feelings of alienation among them due to the unequal power relations involved within the HE system (Povey et al., 2022).

Hence, transitioning and permanency processes for Indigenous students should incorporate activities that foster a sense of belonging. According to Craven and Mooney (2013), HE staff need to understand Indigenous knowledge and culture to positively influence student experiences. Additionally, involving families and communities is crucial, as a lack of support can lead to feelings of isolation, stress, and depression among Indigenous students (Taylor et al., 2019). Kinnane et al. (2014) suggest that recognizing cultural heritage, connecting with peers, and engaging with Indigenous academics can motivate students to achieve their academic goals (Gore et al., 2017). Increased participation of senior Indigenous students and graduates in HE can provide essential support, helping to combat negative perceptions of HE as irrelevant or disconnected from Indigenous traditions and culture (Behrendt et al., 2012; Gore et al., 2017)

Culturally appropriate education creates a safe environment and responds to the learning needs of Indigenous students. Trudgett (2011) claims that a lack of cultural awareness within HE is perceived as a lack of respect and leads to a loss of interest because the knowledge delivered is not relevant from Indigenous students' point of view, and it puts Indigenous students in a position where they have to

choose between their academic objectives or their cultural identity (Sharrock & Lockyer, 2008). Thus, universities that do not respect Indigenous cultural identity are perceived as unsafe spaces. Durmush et al. (2021) argue that culturally safe spaces support determinants in retention and completion. For that reason, it is important for Indigenous students to ensure that universities are places where cultural connections understood as spirituality, culture, nature, land, and Country are respected (Durmush et al., 2021).

The literature indicates that many Indigenous students find HE to be an unfamiliar and hostile environment, presenting various barriers. Kinnane et al. (2014) identifies factors such as financial issues, racism, bureaucracy, transition challenges, inadequate cultural education, and differing success metrics as key obstacles. West et al. (2014) suggest that academics aware of their roles can help create a safe learning environment for Indigenous students, while Martin (2006) emphasizes the importance of a cooperative climate that values self-belief and cultural respect, fostering a sense of belonging.

In summary, redefining Indigenous 'success' in HE requires decolonizing the curriculum and practices to align with cultural sovereignty and self-determination, as noted by Bullen & Flavell (2021) and Bodkin-Andrews (2016). This is crucial, given that the neoliberal, market-oriented approach often prioritizes Western capitalist models, overlooking the community-centred aspirations vital to many Indigenous students. Therefore, HE should integrate Indigenous knowledge and perspectives on communal well-being rather than focusing solely on market-driven outcomes while also addressing the structural issues tied to settler colonialism and racism.

HE and Success and Aspirations.

One of the key outcomes of the Behrendt review (Behrendt et al., 2012) was the recommendation for a comprehensive Indigenous human capital strategy aimed at building aspirations from early education stages and supporting broader social policy objectives to enhance the motivation and self-confidence of Indigenous students (Anderson, 2011). In response, HE policies have prompted universities to commit to attracting and effectively supporting Indigenous students to ensure their graduation (Vass & Hogarth, 2022). However, this approach primarily emphasizes individual aspirations (McRae-Williams, 2014) as a measure of success in Indigenous higher education, with the overarching goal of “closing the gap” in economic and social well-being (Osborne & Guenther, 2013), which may not align with the collective values that are integral to Indigenous cultures.

Given the significant role of success and aspirations in public policy, their definitions must be examined carefully. Success, in its most generic form, refers to achieving goals or purposes (Street et al., 2022). In HE particularly from a Western-centric viewpoint, this is often equated with obtaining employment, achieving financial independence, and contributing “productively” to society. Han (2015b) argues that success in Western society reflects an insatiable desire for personal advancement, characterized by relentless achievement and material accumulation. Bauman’s (2013) concept of “liquid modernity” further emphasizes that success is tied to consumerism and self-improvement, suggesting that a successful individual adapts to societal demands and continually acquires knowledge, power, and wealth.

This understanding of success has critical implications for public policy, serving as a key element in ensuring efficiency in resource allocation (Street, 2023). However, as Moodie et al. (2021) highlight, the concept has come under scrutiny from Indigenous scholars who argue it is framed within settler-colonial frameworks that perpetuate the trauma of Indigenous Australians. Scholars such as Anderson (2011) and Trudgett (2011) indicate that, in contrast to the Western-centric view, success for Indigenous students is a collective journey rooted in community and cultural values.

Despite some progress since the 1960s, HE remains entrenched in a settler-colonial framework that shapes Indigenous students' experiences (Brayboy, 2021). Delgado and Stefancic (2017) suggest that success in HE is often defined by policies aimed at correcting the perceived failures of Indigenous students to meet dominant standards. In the same way, Castillo and Gillborn (2022). and Guenther (2021) critique the reliance on statistical measures to evaluate success, arguing that such metrics promote competition and individualism instead of creating culturally appropriate educational environments where Indigenous students can thrive according to their community-defined aspirations.

The hegemonic view of success in public policy has resulted in the inadequate integration of Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum, framing Indigenous students as failures to be *fixed* and contributing to their underrepresentation in HE decision-making (Page et al., 2017; Vass & Hogarth, 2022). The contrast between Western paradigms and Indigenous epistemologies—emphasizing community, land, and relationality—highlights the curriculum's failure to effectively incorporate Indigenous perspectives (Pidgeon, 2016). In this context, scholars such as Biermann, S. (2011) and Street, (2023) advocate for a deconstruction of HE to challenge the dominance of Western standards of knowledge, while Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson (2016) asserts that meaningful change cannot occur without dismantling settler-colonial narratives from within the system.

In this context, although policy has shifted toward an equity-based focus, the concept of success still fails to meet the needs and aspirations of Indigenous Australians. Street (2023) indicates that their inclusion has been predominantly measured through quantitative elements such as enrolment, retention, and completion to assess the success of public policy. This perspective, as noted by Woollorton et al. (2022), places the responsibility for learning solely on Indigenous students, portraying them as a "problem" that needs to be solved according to neoliberal quantitative outcomes.

Focusing on these quantitative measures of success in relation to the inclusion of Indigenous students in HE also places considerable pressure on institutions. According to Street 2023 and Trudgett (2022) public policy positions HE as an essential tool for developing a high-skilled workforce to ensure Australia's prosperity. This has led to incentives for studying "profitable" programs, such as those in STEM fields, over humanities or social sciences, which are perceived as less aligned with economic goals. Consequently, through performance measures and periodic evaluations, universities are forced to adhere to neoliberal metrics, emphasizing competition, productivity, and individualism (Marsh & McConnell, 2010; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009).

In this context, aspirations are essential for achieving success as they align with society's expectation of self-achievement. From Bauman's (2004) perspective, aspirations define people's lives by providing meaning about what constitutes a "good life" in a consumerist society. Consequently, aspirations are

continuously oriented toward the future rather than the present (Corbett, 2016). For this reason, public policy has focused on stimulating aspirations, as they serve as motivational devices to ensure that Indigenous students meet the expectations of Western HE and can be included in the neoliberal, market-centred society of individualism and self-exploitation.

However, in Indigenous contexts, especially in remote communities, there are several factors that influence aspirations. For example, Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson (2016) and Smith et al. (2023) indicate that elements such as colonization and intergenerational trauma affect Indigenous Australians' decisions to pursue further HE and their perseverance during scholarships. According to Smith et al. (2023), these elements impact cultural identity, future aspirations, emotional well-being, and pride in their heritage. However, these factors are often not clearly addressed in public policy, which typically focuses on other elements to influence students' aspirations instead of recognizing the commitment to social justice and the desire to contribute skills back to their communities that often guide Indigenous students' aspirations. Moreover, the Western educational system's emphasis on individualism places the responsibility of success on Indigenous students, fostering a narrative of self-reliance and independence. Guenther (2021) argues that recognizing the relevance of HE to their cultural identity is crucial for these students, as without this connection, HE risks becoming merely a mechanism to fulfil market demands.

Thus, the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge and culture in the definition of success and aspiration in public policy illustrates how settler-colonial structures in HE continue to create an unsafe cultural space. This is due to the ongoing framing of individual failures rather than analyzing structural inequities. Considering the experiences of Indigenous students from Bhabha's (1994) perspective, it is essential to recognize that these students as mentioned before, particularly those from remote areas, operate within a "third space" or in between two worlds, negotiating the tensions between Western paradigms and Indigenous knowledge. This dynamic remains largely absent in public policy, which fails to accommodate that "third space," often enforcing a binary notion of success that privileges Western definitions.

Remote Indigenous Students: Between Success and Cultural Safety.

For the purpose of special support and funding, Australia's HE policy recognizes vulnerable students as 'equity' students with six categories of 'equity' in order to improve their access to HE. These include: i) Indigenous Peoples, ii) those from low socio-economic backgrounds, iii) people with disabilities, iv) people from regional and remote areas, v) people from non-English speakers' backgrounds, and vi) women in non-traditional areas of study (Department of Education and Training, 2021). It is notable that remote Indigenous students usually fit in many of those categories at the same time. Government initiatives directed to ensure enrolment, retention, and completion also cover issues regarding unfamiliarity with the HE environment, geographical location, being the first family member to attend university, and restricted local facilities and economic opportunities (Gore et al., 2017; Senior & Chenhall, 2012; Walker et al., 2008).

Remote Indigenous people in Australia experience greater difficulty accessing education than other Australians. Although at first sight, this is the result of adverse social and geographical conditions, these difficulties also reflect the inflexibility and underfunding of the education system, which does not

respond properly to Indigenous people's cultural needs and perpetuates the mainstream concept of education to those communities (Guenther, 2021). According to Pollard (2018), while HE policy encourages all students to pursue their education goals, pursuing those goals becomes more difficult when a child is born in remote Australia because only one-third are likely to attend university compared to a child born in urban areas (Cassells et al., 2017), and they are also less likely to complete their studies, only 60.33% compared to 74.87% of students from urban areas (Department of Education and Training, 2017).

Thus, even with improved access to HE, there are still many remote Indigenous students who do not receive appropriate support for their needs at the early stages of their studies. These needs are compounded by language challenges; for most remote students, English is not their mother tongue and may even be their third language spoken at home, and for many, English is an additional language or a dialect (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2019). Regarding the increasing trend towards providing online learning Anthony & Keating (2013) identify issues of access to bandwidth technology and lack of culturally appropriate IT training as factors that could widen the education gap. The assumption of online education is based on assumptions that people are familiar with computer skills because they were developed in earlier education stages and at home. Digital inclusion remains an elusive concept in many remote communities (Guenther, 2021). There is also an assumption about the proficiency of students' English skills which does not fit with the realities faced by remote Indigenous. Therefore, although online education can facilitate learning, it does not guarantee that learning will occur (Anthony & Keating, 2013).

Not surprisingly, Kinnane et al. (2014) indicate that for students expected to study online, a further problem is caused by a lack of confidence in the online environment, while for on-campus students, Behrendt et al. (2012) claim that the problem is based on cultural isolation and the financial pressure of relocation as well as wellbeing issues regarding "homesickness." For that reason, it is important to include special support for Indigenous students in both scenarios to ensure that online students have access to introductory workshops about the technological environment and permanent interaction with tutors, while on-campus students should maintain contact with their families and communities to overcome the isolation (Behrendt et al., 2012; Kinnane et al., 2014).

The impact of colonization continues to affect remote Indigenous people. The impacts have been shaped by settler-colonialist policies oriented to protectionism and assimilation. Nakata (2007) suggests that historically, Indigenous public policy has been biased by external experts and missionaries who worked on understanding the "savage mind" of Aboriginal Peoples. For that reason, education was primarily focused on Western values to "civilize" Indigenous Peoples and to "eliminate" their traditional values. Although that approach is no longer accepted, the resistance entrenched within the educational system to teach in accordance with traditional cultural values has been a constant during the different periods of public policies. In the case of remote Indigenous communities, the outcome has been intergenerational underachievement, alienation, and the settlement of remote Indigenous communities by external authorities instead of social dynamics (Guenther, 2021).

Further, the recognition of the cultural uniqueness of different Indigenous communities and tribes should be expressed in the measures of success of HE if its objective is to genuinely embark on a

program towards making HE more relevant for Indigenous people. Pollard (2018) explains that remote students are not only an element of a large regional cohort but are a different group themselves with a great richness of cultural diversity encompassing unique cosmologies, epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies. These impact what is deemed important knowledge and the right ways to impart and build knowledge. For example, Foley (2018) indicates that Indigenous philosophy involves the triangulation of the Physical, the Human, and the Sacred worlds. Christie et al (2009, p.30) explain that from the point of view of Yolngu in East Arnhem land:

Whereas in Western models, knowers are born as more or less clean slates and are gradually filled with ordered knowing by virtue of experience, in the Yolngu world, knowers are born full—filled with everything they will need for effective participation in adult life. But they must be treated properly for their talents to take good effect. Learning here is the mobilisation of an ordered flowing of that ancestral experience already and always filling the knower. Experience of the right sort is crucial here if knowers are to reach their full potential. Places, families and events are the motive forces. Gifted and talented children are born gifted and talented, their gifts are coextensive with the land and what it provides, their talents are their minds and bodies, connecting each to his or her ancestral places, kin, totems and connections.

The triangulation of the physical, human, and sacred worlds represents a challenge to the consumerist logic of the neoliberal paradigm. It indicates that a more participative, cooperative approach, learning with and from Country, is essential in the education process, which is often absent in Western higher education (Poelina et al., 2023). This position is antagonistic to the individualist neoliberal approach, as it seeks to decolonize modernity through a cycle that involves deepening relationships and transformative learning practices (Wooltorton et al., 2022). The relationship between learning and Country represents an accountability to the past, present, and future within their own space and time. It suggests that Country has much to teach, and that learning is a relational process understood as foundational to living (Poelina et al., 2023), which contrasts sharply with the Western notion of success. In Western education, an analysis of the aspirations-building process and concepts of success shows that higher education imposes values generated elsewhere onto students, rather than understanding the learning models of remote Indigenous communities (Wooltorton et al., 2022).

Hence, HE providers should be cognizant of current Western paradigms and re-examine them to encompass significantly different world views if they are to meet the aims put forward by Kinnane et al. (2014) and Wilks & Wilson (2015) of cultural appropriateness, embracing Indigenous knowledge and learning styles, as well as including families and communities in the building-aspiration process (Gore et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2015). The inclusion of those elements is especially important because, in remote Indigenous communities, the idea of access to formal education as a step to be successful in life is not as present as in Western contexts. In that way, according to Guenther (2021) and Kinnane et al. (2014), making HE a real option requires a more embedded approach.

In this context, students' aspirations are more directed to their collective well-being than to individual security in terms of education and employment (Gore et al., 2017). Thus, Guenther (2021) and Parkes et al. (2015) claim that the challenge for universities is to include definitions of success that are holistic and community-oriented to make them more relevant to remote Indigenous realities. From this starting

point, much work remains in consulting with communities regarding what kind of formal Western HE they require and how it might best be delivered to meet the aspirations and definitions of success for these communities. A good example is given by the Garma Institute located in northeast Arnhem Land, which represents a dialogue between Western education and the on-country learning for Indigenous people from early childhood to University (Prime Minister of Australia, 2023).

In sum, while public policy to include Remote Indigenous students in HE has been oriented to correct geographical distance and internet issues, students' concerns have been focused on the cultural gap between Western education and their traditions. Wilks et al. (2020) demonstrate that 'cultural security' is required by remote Indigenous students to incorporate their culture and language in their learning, which becomes especially important because those elements represent their traditional literacies and knowledge, which express what Indigenous peoples in remote areas want to be (Street et al., 2023).

Further, Guenther (2021) indicates that while there is a considerable amount of research on Indigenous students in HE, there is not enough regarding the experiences of remote Indigenous students. For that reason, more research is required to understand their experiences in HE and their experiences prior to enrolment in HE. Likewise, Pollard (2018) indicates that research should go beyond a "negative narrative discourse" of deficit, and instead, it should highlight the attributes that help remote Indigenous students to go through HE. This is especially important when considering that remote Indigenous education has much to teach to Western models in terms of locally generated insights that provide pathways for change, promote the inclusion of stories and discourses of justice, and highlights the significance of Country. Additionally, it fosters a level of critique that would enable education systems to adapt responsively to the needs of Indigenous learners on Country (Wooltorton et al., 2022).

Discussion/Conclusions.

Critical Discussion:

This paper addresses the question of whether *HE public policy meets the needs of Indigenous people in terms of success, especially those from remote areas*. The findings reveal a significant misalignment between public policy and Indigenous conceptions of success. Current HE policies and institutional practices primarily focus on individual quantitative measures, such as enrolments, retention, and completions, which are rooted in Western paradigms and neoliberal economic principles aimed at "closing the gap" between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The literature review adopted a two-pronged methodology, a scoping review and an integrative review, to comprehensively map the existing literature and identify knowledge gaps. This approach revealed a substantial misalignment between current HE policies and the needs of Indigenous Australians. While there have been efforts to enhance Indigenous representation through various support measures, these policies usually fail to address systemic issues such as racism, discrimination, and the ongoing legacy of settler-colonialism. This oversight is particularly problematic within a neoliberal discourse that emphasises individual effort and attributes barriers to success to personal limitations. This Western-centric perspective hides the systemic injustices rooted in colonialism and racism within HE system (Davis, 2007). Consequently, success in HE becomes not merely a policy measure but a pressure point

for Indigenous students to become part of Western-dominated system, reinforcing existing inequities. The relentless pursuit of individual success risks undermining Indigenous collectivist values in favor of the prevailing neoliberal narrative of progress. This situation puts Indigenous knowledge, particularly that of remote communities, at risk because it imposes an individualist paradigm and a dominion over nature, rather than promoting Country-based learning. This shift detracts from the collectivist paradigm that is prevalent in remote communities (Wooltorton et al., 2022).

From the Han's (2015b) concept of the "society of transparency," it is suggested that a more profound, systemic approach to inclusivity is required to transcend mere statistical improvements and address the foundational challenges faced by Indigenous students.

It is also important, particularly during the aspiration-building process, to recognize that Indigenous perspectives may differ from Western cultural norms. Without this acknowledgment, initiatives aimed at fostering aspirations related to employment and financial income may neglect the cultural aspirations of Indigenous Australians. The current aspirational frameworks often reflect Foucault's (1977) notion of "disciplinary power," imposing Western-centric expectations and marginalizing Indigenous perspectives within a narrow discourse of success and achievement.

Existing HE policies frequently arise from political and economic agendas rather than addressing the specific needs of Indigenous students. Stephen Ball's critique highlights the need to prioritize educational equity over economic outcomes. This shift necessitates the integration of Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies into curricula and pedagogical practices, ensuring that success is measured not only quantitatively but also through cultural perspectives that overcome the deficit discourse that subordinate Indigenous knowledge and culture to the settle-colonial discourse, knowledge and power.

The barriers faced by remote Indigenous students, such as geographic isolation and significant cultural differences with Western educational models—particularly regarding language—demand tailored support mechanisms. This includes developing HE models that are culturally appropriate and that respect and incorporate Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning.

Conclusion:

The paper's analysis underscores the need for a HE system to better align with the needs of Indigenous students in terms of success, especially those from remote areas. The current focus on individual quantitative measures of success fails to address the cultural and systemic issues impacting Indigenous students. In this context, the literature review has led to the following conclusions:

1. It is important to move beyond superficial measures that respond to current political issues and address systemic problems such as racism, discrimination, and settler-colonialism. A genuine commitment to including Indigenous people in HE involves confronting these issues.

2. HE public policies and institutions need to redefine success in ways that incorporate Indigenous perspectives. This redefinition could lead to a more equitable educational environment that respects and values diverse ways of knowing.
3. HE should recognize and accommodate the dual aspirations of Indigenous students, such as employment and cultural preservation. The predominance of neoliberal perspectives should not be an excuse to prioritize economic outcomes over the diverse needs of Indigenous students.
4. To effectively support remote Indigenous students, the HE system must develop tailored support mechanisms and culturally appropriate resources. This includes creating educational environments that align with Indigenous knowledge systems and worldviews.
5. Decisions regarding Indigenous HE must be made in consultation with Indigenous peoples, particularly those from remote areas, to promote Country-based knowledge. Re-indigenization and decolonization can foster a continuum of change that enhances respect for Indigenous peoples, places, and knowledge. This process is essential not only for improving HE for Indigenous students but also for providing insights that could lead to a more inclusive and less individualistic educational framework for all Australian students.
6. To ensure that HE effectively responds to these needs, further research is needed to determine how HE public policy and practice meet the aspirations and needs of Indigenous people, particularly those from remote areas.

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