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Race and Equity in higher education: A harder path for Indigenous academics

Our experiences as Indigenous academics within universities often reflects the experiences we have as Indigenous people in broader society, yet I am still surprised and angered when it is others working in higher education who espouse notions of justice and equity with whom we experience tension and conflict in asserting our rights, values and cultural values. At times it is a constant struggle even when universities have Reconciliation Statements as most of them do now, Indigenous recruitment or employment strategies and university wide anti-racism and anti-discrimination policies and procedures.

The reality is that universities can and do reproduce imperial attitudes and processes which marginalise and exclude us whilst proclaiming they want to include and involve us. It is with sadness that sometimes it is also other unionists within higher education environments with whom we experience such conflict and tension and issues of inclusion and exclusion.

Indigenous academics experience many of the same issues faced by other higher education workers. We also face issues that are particular to us as Indigenous employees and as Indigenous academics. For example, Indigenous academics:

struggle to be recognised for the work we do in our disciplines and to be employed within our disciplines.

apply for academic positions against non-Indigenous people who have been in jobs for years in fields of study that are about us.

are sometimes employed because other academics in the university think they (Indigenous person) will 'fit in'. This is problematic when the status quo marginalises Indigenous people.

have to work with other academics who labour against Indigenous voices about our being, our knowledge, our culture and our land and show no concern for our rights or empowerment.

can be seen as 'ungrateful' and 'stirrers' when we question, raise issues and challenge and when non-Indigenous academics are positioned as the 'good people' who are only trying to help. Statements about people 'just trying to help' assist in hiding non-Indigenous privilege, power and hierarchy associated with the academy.

compete in grant application processes against non-Indigenous academics who apply in opposition to us rather than with us for research projects about us.

can be asked to be involved in grant applications as associate investigators or later asked to do the project's interviews with Indigenous participants, assist in analysing data, and to enact Indigenous research protocols and procedures instead of being asked to be a Co-investigator or another Chief Investigator.

can be told to seek Indigenous sources of funding even though as academics we are entitled to access university-based funding.

continually hear and watch our qualifications devalued.

are often on short-term employment contracts and articulating issues or questioning the racialised power and privilege within the work unit, school or faculty may jeopardise any on-going contracts or possible tenure.

experience the reality that Indigenous Studies journals are graded much lower in the ERA process than journals in other disciplines and fields.

are excluded from discussions about Indigenous scholarly matters when universities only consult with the Indigenous Centres on campus.

are excluded and marginalised when the only viable employment for us is seen as the Indigenous Centres.

are sometimes held back by Indigenous and non-Indigenous gatekeepers within universities.

can be asked for the purposes of equity, cultural diversity, representation, to sit on a committee, be a resource to assist in connecting students to Indigenous community groups, or be a member of a curriculum review panel. This is regardless of whether we have expressed interest or not, and whether we have skills and abilities in that area or not.

can be oppressed, disempowered and exploited by both men and women in universities, including women who raise issues associated with the 'glass ceiling' and gender-based disadvantages.

Audre Lorde (1984: 44) states that, 'it is not difference that immobilises us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken'. I have tried to break the silence and to make visible some of the issues that Indigenous academics face within universities. Silence allows people to feel warm and fuzzy about having an array of Indigenous related documents (Reconciliation Statements, Indigenous Employment Strategies) while Indigenous peoples are still being marginalised, denigrated and exploited within universities and continues the on-going systemic marginalisation and institutional privilege and the epistemology that maintains them. I encourage others to move beyond the warm and fuzzy feelings, beyond the thinking that our universities are doing ok because we have these documents. They are not! They are only a beginning, we can't stop there. We need to move beyond them and be looking towards what comes next. To be part of future change:

I want you and need you to break the silences, to question and to name.

I want you and need you to examine your own practices within universities.

I want you and need you to enact and act for real change, for you and me.

Lorde, A. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.