

## **INDIGENOUS SUCCESS WITH PROF PROF GAWAIAN BODKIN-ANDREWS**

### **Voiceover**

Welcome to “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it”, with Dr Katelyn Barney and Professor Tracey Bunda.

### **Dr Barney**

Hi, I’m Katelyn, and welcome to our podcast series, “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it”. I’d like to start the podcast by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands where we are recording this today, and pay my respects to their ancestors and their descendants. I’d also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of wherever you’re listening from today.

The podcast series focuses on what works in outreach programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students. This series is part of a suite of resources developed from an Equity Fellowship that I undertook funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education in 2020 and it focuses on success factors that are based on key findings from the Fellowship. Each episode is an interview with an Indigenous staff member or university student about aspects of effective outreach programs. I’m a non-Indigenous woman born and raised on Jagera and Turrbal Country and I’m joined by my co-host and colleague, Professor Tracey Bunda who was part of the advisory group on the Fellowship.

### **Prof Bunda**

Hi, everyone. I’m a Ngugi/Wakka Wakka woman and currently I am the acting Director of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies unit at the University of Queensland. Katelyn and I decided to call the podcast series, “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it” because there are multiple understandings of “success” in this context; thinking about the influences of success, life experience, locations, the context for success and cultural matters. Also, you’ll hear Katelyn and I use the terms “Aboriginal” and “Torres Strait Islander”, “Indigenous”, and “First Nations” in this podcast and we want to acknowledge this and note we are aware of the diversity and different perspectives on the use of these terms.

### **Dr Barney**

We hope that the podcast series is useful for outreach practitioners working with Indigenous students, but we also hope the podcast is useful for anyone with an interest in student success and student equity in higher education more generally.

The theme of this episode is around methodological approaches to evaluation of outreach programs and our guest today is Professor Prof Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews who is Director of Indigenous Research at Western Sydney University. Welcome, Gawaian.

### **Prof Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews**

Thank you, Katelyn, and thank you Aunty Tracey for having me.

### **Prof Bunda**

Gawaian, could you introduce yourself in whatever way is comfortable for you?

### **Prof Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews**

If you don't mind, I'll just introduce myself through some language, D'harawal language, which I'm very, very proudly a not fluent speaker of but getting there – maybe hopefully one day. [Speaking in D'harawal language.]

I'll have to give obviously an English translation to that and it's not an exact translation; we have differences in sentence structures and so forth so please don't assume I'm using English sentence structure either there, but anyway, I started off with an acknowledgement, I guess, of who I am at least physically in my appearance, and that is I can very easily pass as a white person, and with that, I carry with me a certain privilege I guess, both as a white person, and as a male, and I'd just ask that you'll recognise that as much as possible, I'm aware of this, and still becoming aware of this privilege that's, I would argue, being forced upon my family through generations of colonisation but with that being said, I also ask that you understand that I was born and raised as a D'harawal person and I've always lived on either Bidjigal or Nattaimattagal which both my parents identify as. "Bidjigal" is "bitter waters", where the salt waters meet the fresh waters, or the rivers run backwards with the tides, and "Nattaimattagal" is a fresh water Country extending out past South-East Sydney into the Nattai Valley area.

And then, finally, I just gave my respect to Elders of the past, present, and future, and I say this just to respect our dreaming and that our dreaming is not just a thing of the past and the lessons from it and the Elders who have passed on these lessons do not just exist in our past, but they exist in the today, are with us today, and they also will exist in our future if we continue to survive and thrive or promote Indigenous success, I guess.

### **Prof Bunda**

Gawaian, I know that you've recently taken up a new role in a different university. Can you tell us about that role, and any possible links that you see yourself having with outreach and engagement programs?

### **Prof Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews**

My role as Director of Indigenous Research is a relatively new role here at Western Sydney University and I'm currently overseeing the recruitment and retention of our Indigenous HDR students which is a very fast-growing base here at WSU and that includes support mechanisms such as the Yarramundi Scholarship, supervision strategies, and most importantly, I would argue the recruitment, not only from our community, but from within WSU itself which is, I think, something that sometimes universities forget about, but also, I'm looking at external sources of funding for Indigenous research, whether it be led by Indigenous or non-Indigenous scholars just assisting the grant applications there and ensuring they're doing it one of the many right ways, as opposed to potentially causing damage for the future. So, yes, I also have a fairly big overlap with Ethics here at WSU as well.

### **Dr Barney**

We know that there hasn't been a lot of evaluation of outreach programs for Indigenous students; can you talk a bit about your perspective of methodological approaches to evaluation?

### **Prof Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews**

Early on in my PhD days it wasn't necessarily evaluation-based, but I did a lot of my research on self-perceptions and motivation, achievement of Indigenous students within primary schools and high schools. I had worked in a centre that through various means that had a

strong Indigenous research focus but was predominantly non-indigenous-led if that makes any sense, but regardless, some very important lessons that came out of that. Basically for me, the most important one was to, I guess, not get caught up too much with the jargon or the agendas; to really always have a good look at yourself and what you're doing and don't be afraid to protect yourself, otherwise you'll just get stuck in a rut, and often these ruts tend to be from a Western epistemic foundation which can do more harm than good there.

Then I moved into – quite luckily it was – Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience research with the University of Wollongong; some beautiful scholars there both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – my very strong Indigenous scholar but also there was Sarah O'Shea who's amazing, Valerie Harwood – some really good non-Indigenous scholars working within the Indigenous space and very successful as well. The Australian Business Mentoring Experience was an actual evaluation and I took care of the quantitative component of it but also was, I guess, I won't say "advising" but offering input into the qualitative components and how they interpret findings a little bit there and so forth. That was an interesting experience and it taught me also the need to be aware of the statistics we use, or the methodologies we use, and the stories they actually tell. These are tools, and these tools can be used in the wrong way or the right way.

The AIME evaluation experience really, when you really looked into the data a little bit more deeply and more carefully, some very strong stories came out but if you just took a very soft approach, or shallow approach to either the poll or the point data, yes, it told a good story, but yeah, if you know what you're doing, the story will be a much, much stronger story if you really dig down deep. I guess the next phase of evaluation wasn't necessarily evaluation per se, but evaluation development and this is at the University of Technology Sydney – some amazing leadership by Professor Michael McDaniel, Professor Larissa Behrendt saw a team of us come over to UTS and work on the Indigenous Graduate Attribute Project, and my particular job there was to focus on how we [put a value? 0:09:02] the implementation of the Indigenous Graduate Attributes within university's teaching and learning space.

That was really a lesson for me in really centring Indigenous stand-points, Indigenous of knowing and being and doing in evaluation, not just in teaching and learning, and there were some very interesting results that came out of that – that was actually the approach to the research for me was really the most important thing as opposed to critiquing the data and so forth. That's my primary experience in terms of evaluation projects; each of these projects has an important story to tell and that's really contributed to my own learning experience.

### **Prof Bunda**

What kinds of tips would you offer those outreach practitioners when they're looking at evaluation, and possibly working with researchers? What are the things that they've got to look for?

### **Prof Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews**

This is a really important question, and I guess you can call it the interface between the outreach practitioners and researchers at universities – I've got some horrible stories to tell here, namely from what researchers can do and don't do, more importantly, and how we can actually guide universities and researchers themselves to do the right thing is critically important and I guess these outreach practitioners, you're on the ground face, you're there with the lived experiences, or living experiences of the Indigenous students and you need to respect their voices. I remember early on in my research career, we had a very interesting

project which was all about success; there was a mixed method approach where we looked at very large-scale quantitative research across 52 schools in New South Wales but there were some really in-depth qualitative findings out of it, and there were some very strong partnerships but the emphasis was on “success” and so, a qualitative component for schools were selected. Of course they’re Indigenous students who are really well, but three of these schools were, I thought, from a cultural perspective, absolutely awesome – really safe places, as safe as a school can be in a multi-cultural and largely non-Indigenous environment, but there was one school that, for me, and for a young Indigenous HDR student was attached to the student, where it was very unsettled and this particular school was, as far as I’m concerned, an example of assimilation.

Their Indigenous content was basically some boomerangs hung up in the library and that was it. The school took the approach that “Indigenous stuff is too hard”, and the problem with this particular research project was our emphasis was on the success, the strengths, and there was this particular school and I don’t know how we could deal with it ethically because obviously we can’t name schools or anything like that – that really needed to be critiqued, needed advice, but it was a smash and grab project, we went in there, collected the data, gave minimalistic presentations back to the schools themselves and left. And so there was this hole in the actual project that left me deeply uncomfortable and something needed to be done there. I was low level at the time in the project, and had very little say in its directions and what was reported and so forth – bit of a guinea pig there – and for me it was, in the end, probably resulted in a bit of a falling-out with the university itself and particular researchers but you need to stand up and not let these researchers dictate everything. It is a beautiful, very powerful project, but the measurement of outcomes would have been – or sole measurement of outcomes from a Western perspective – would have been completely wrong, and that could have had significant policy implications if we let this representative get away with what they were saying.

If you’re on the ground level, always respect where you’re coming from, respect those you’re working with, and just know that us as researchers, we are not infallible, we are often wrong, or we get too excited from our own theoretical perspectives, or our own particular methods – not methodologies – that we get stuck in a rut, and so, don’t be afraid to correct us and help align us to where we should be going in terms of the research.

### **Dr Bunda**

That research space, or even just that general engagement space – just got to watch that power and how it’s playing out on you, don’t you?

### **Prof Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews**

I guess that’s another part of the research; if you’re at the ground level as an outreach practitioner and so forth, you’ve got a lot of research knowledge and it may not be translated into some journal paper that will hardly ever be accessed by anyone in the real world as opposed to academia, but you are actually a real researcher, a real-life researcher and you’re there, empowering your students, empowering our communities so yeah, never forget about that.

### **Prof Bunda**

That’s a wonderful reminder that on the ground, our outreach practitioners are researchers as well.

### **Dr Barney**

Yeah, and come with a lot of knowledge that they bring with them as well. You were talking a little bit about cultural aspects in schools just then, and that was a finding from the Fellowship was that embedding more cultural aspects in outreach programs was something that students would like, and that does link with some of your earlier work around the importance of cultural identity as a positive driver – some of the work you’ve done on that and schooling motivation. Can you talk a bit about why you think cultural aspects in outreach programs might be important?

### **Prof Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews**

Firstly, from an academic perspective, the evidence is there; sometimes it’s not clear, sometimes it gets washed away by ideological mentalities and particular forces who want to deny it or downplay it, or take a deficit approach. The good research, or research that digs a little bit deeper, culture always will come out to play as a very important... pardon the terminology – variable. I guess two examples I have is one of the early research projects I was involved in looked at a simplistic quantitative measure of culture and “cultural safety in the classroom” is probably a better way of putting it, as reported by the students themselves, and quite interestingly, the project itself was based upon, I guess, the self-confidence of Indigenous students within schools.

The research leaders were all about Indigenous self-concepts and so forth, and how important they need to be confident in school to not only be motivated to attend school but also to achieve better in school. There’s a lot of international research supporting this right? I was involved in doing the analysis for this particular project, and ended up writing the actual report for it. In the end, it was actually found for these primary school students that the more the Aboriginal students felt safe in the classroom about their culture, their Indigeneity, their willingness to not only share and talk about their Indigeneity and their culture, but also its visible presence in the classroom and so forth, then not only did it result in higher levels of confidence at school but also actually resulted in higher levels of achievement at school, over and above prior achievements. So, this was an independent predictor of these students actually performing better which is a very, very powerful finding as far as I’m concerned.

Then we go into the interrogation of data more carefully, so this is a presentation I did which I sadly never published, and that’s a fault of my own there. I remember one of the AARE conferences where basically we ran your basic linear regression which is a predictive – does culture predict engagement at school and aspirations to go to university, which is what AIME was all about, and what was found was actually the motivation of the students from a Western measure and the self-confidence of the students was a stronger predictor of actual, what we would call it, these going to university and being engaged in school type outcomes.

So, these Western measures won out but then we’ve got to keep in mind, is university a Western or a cultural outcome, and is school a cultural place, or is it a Western learning place? So, the cards were stacked to ensure that these Western measures of self-confidence and motivation would win out, but, with that being said, the students who reported a stronger sense of identity, also safety about their identity, were more likely to be self-confident, were more likely to be motivated academically. And so, we ran some interaction analyses and found out that the effects of self-concept and also motivation, academic motivation, were enhanced when the students had a stronger sense of culture. So, yes, culture is extremely important. With that being said, how do we measure it? My advice is start with the voices of the students themselves – what’s important to understanding who they are, the work of

Cheryl Kickett-Tucker, an amazing Aboriginal scholar here who's done much to motivate me in that direction, but yeah, if you can measure it better, and not based on a Western-type construct then I'm pretty sure you'll find some very strong effects there, and not only that, also remember that achievements at school and aspirations to go to university are not the only outcomes.

**Prof Bunda**

This podcast is called “Indigenous Success – doing it, thinking it, being it”. What does “Indigenous success” mean to you?

**Prof Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews**

For me, it's a tough one. I live in quite a tense space culturally speaking in the Sydney area – we've been hit very hard by colonisation, been a lot of, I guess colonial story-telling about who we are, who has a right to call themselves “Aboriginal” [0:19:26] their ways and so forth. I think one of our biggest strengths is to recognise that each of our mobs have our own battles against the forces of colonisation and whiteness, and being white-washed or erased from our histories and our futures as well. And whilst I've seen some very strong academics, Indigenous academics, be critical of notions of survival and resistance when we should be focusing on strength and so forth, I would take the argument that this strength would not be there if we did not understand our abilities to survive against what is a plague of whiteness and that continues to exist today in policy, academia, and even in everyday community interactions through racism and so forth.

For me, strength is a matter of survival still, remembering our ancestors, remembering their lessons and ensure they're being passed on. It's about resilience and resisting the status quo, it's about resisting whiteness itself, and not being infected to the extent where we actually perpetuate whiteness unknowingly in our own work and our research, and then it's about being strong and standing up for what our ancestors have passed on to us, and also standing up for our futures, and making sure that there are stronger Indigenous futures for all of our mobs.

**Prof Bunda**

Wonderful, wise words. Thank you very much, Gawaian.

**Dr Barney**

Thanks, Gawaian. Great to talk to you.

**Prof Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews**

[Speaking in D'harawal language]. Always walk in the sunlight. Thank you.

**Prof Bunda**

Katelyn and I both want to thank you for joining this podcast series, “Indigenous success – doing it, thinking it, and being it”. If you've got any questions about this podcast or any of the other podcasts that you may have listened to, please contact Katelyn on her email address – “k.barney...” – that is B-A-R-N-E-Y – k.barney@UQ.edu.au. Thank you very much, and we hope that you'll join us in the future.

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