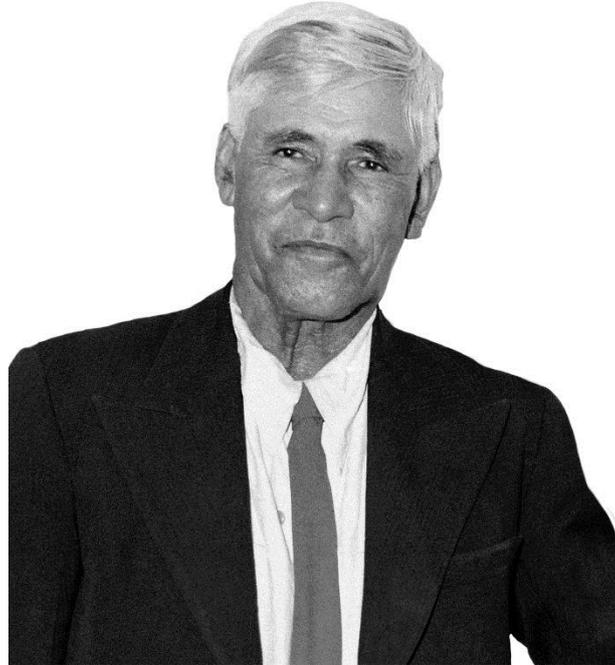


# The Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture Series



1993 Lecture Notes

## **Aborigines and Universities: are they compatible?**

Mary Ann Bin-Salik



The Eighth Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture  
delivered in Armidale, NSW  
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### **Aborigines and Universities: are they compatible?**

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#### **Acknowledgements**

Firstly I acknowledge the Anaiwan people, the original owners of this country. As a Djaru woman of the East Kimberleys I assure you I am here tonight with great respect and humility for you and your country.

I wish to acknowledge all Kooris here, and thank you for your support. I hope that this year, the United Nations' Year of Indigenous Peoples will indeed bring about a new partnership between our people and the wider Australian community.

To you non-Aborigines in the audience, I thank you for coming here tonight and supporting the Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture in partnership with us Kooris.

Chancellor and staff of the University of New England I take this opportunity to acknowledge your University for being the first institution of higher learning in the country to dedicate a memorial lecture to an Aboriginal elder, and as the former Armidale College of Advanced Education in 1971 it was one of the first institutions to offer an accredited course in Aboriginal Studies. Aboriginal leaders delivered a series of guest lectures to student teachers on the plight of Aborigines and various associated issues, thus giving Aborigines a speaking voice within the higher education sector, and students the opportunity to learn first hand from the indigenous people of this country.

These people are: Michael Anderson, Gordon Briscoe, Paul Coe, Ken Colbung, Chicka Dixon, Harry Djagamarra, Ted Fields, the late Kevin Gilbert, Vera Lovelock, the late Joe Mallee, Rex Marshall, Pat O' Shane, John Moriarty, Charles Perkins and Mum Shirl (Tatz and McConnochie, 1975). They were the young energetic leaders of some 20 years ago and have continued in leadership positions. Let us look at what some of them are doing now.

Pat O' Shane, from Queensland, was a law student and former school teacher who went on to become the first Aboriginal law graduate in the country and is now a magistrate in NSW.

Charles Perkins, from Central Australia, was a graduate of the University of Sydney and the Assistant Secretary of the Consultation Branch with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA). He went on to become the Secretary of DAA and now runs his own consultancy firm based in Alice Springs.

Mum Shirl, from NSW, was a founding member of the Aboriginal Medical Service and Breakfast Program in Sydney and counsellor to the Department of Correctional Service. She has actively maintained her interests in these areas and is now a household name.

Gordon Briscoe, from Central Australia, was a founding member of the Aboriginal Medical Service in Sydney and was with the Policy Branch of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and is now PhD student in history at the Australian National University (ANU) actively involved in re-writing Aboriginal history.

Paul Coe, from NSW, was a law student and is now Chairman of the Aboriginal Legal Services in NSW, and one of the foremost Aboriginal lawyers in the country.

John Moriarty, from Northern Territory, was a graduate of Flinders University, Adelaide and Senior Project Officer with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and is now a very successful businessman and owner of Jumbana Design Pty Ltd which is the official sponsor to Aboriginal athlete and Commonwealth Games gold medallist, Kathy Freeman for the 1996 Olympic Games.

A very impressive group of people, I'm sure you would agree. They were in the forefront of the Aboriginal struggle some 20 years ago, and are still there. Their lectures were transcribed and compiled into a book edited by Colin Tatz with the assistance of Keith McConnochie, entitled *Black Viewpoints* (1975), I believe it is an important historical document as it contains the thoughts, feelings and projections of Aboriginal leaders in the mid-seventies.

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## **Introduction**

The title of this lecture is "Universities and Aborigines: are they compatible?". I will be approaching this topic by providing you with an historical background to Aboriginal higher education; with some pertinent thoughts on this history from an Aboriginal perspective which is both critical and celebratory.

## **The Development of Aboriginal Higher Education**

In 1972 the Australian Labor Party won federal office under the leadership of the Honourable Gough Whitlam. By this time it was obvious that Aborigines had successfully rejected assimilation into the wider Australian community. The new Prime Minister introduced the Self Determination Policy for Aborigines, and established the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) which led to the implementation of programs in education, health, legal aid, medical care and housing following consultation with Aboriginal people. This period also marked the evolution of Aboriginal higher education in Australia with the implementation of the Aboriginal Task Force program (ATF) in 1973 within the School of Social Studies, at the South Australian Institute for Technology, with the purpose of training a task force of Aborigines to work in the area of social welfare. Initially the intent was that the program should only operate for a two year period and then be abandoned. Because of the success of the first group of students, and the recommendation of an evaluation at the end of the first year, it was allowed to continue and develop providing the higher education sector with a blue print for what are now known as Aboriginal support programs. These programs are where Aboriginal students are enrolled in standard courses within institutions and given additional support appropriate to their culture, lifestyle and educational background. The major functions being the provision of:

- (a) staff whose role is to assist students in dealing with their course work and developing the necessary skills to proceed through their course to graduation. This involves both counselling support and the provision of and arrangement of special tutorials, personal and academic support;
- (b) structures supporting the maintenance of an Aboriginal identity;
- (c) separate space to complement the above (Jordan, 1984, 6); and
- (d) special entry conditions because of the failure of the secondary schooling system to accommodate the needs of Aborigines (Bin-Sallik, 1990).

The Aboriginal higher education sector developed and expanded because Aborigines proved that given the opportunity we were able to succeed at the higher level despite the failure of the primary and secondary levels of education to meet our needs. I believe that successive federal government capitalised on our success at the higher education level because of the following.

- Australia's perceived need to redress its failings in regard to Aboriginal people particularly in the light of its international political position in the early 1970s (Rowley, 1972; Broome, 1983; Sykes, 1986).
- The federal government's policy of self-management which required competent Aboriginal leadership (DAA, 1972).
- The increased demand for qualified Aboriginal people to take up positions in the growing Aboriginal private and public sector organisation; some 600 positions were identified for Aborigines in 1981 in the Commonwealth Public Service (Brokensha, 1980; Miller, 1985).
- A growing demand by Aborigines for tertiary education.

By 1984 the presence of Aboriginal support programs located within 14 institutions across the country assured a steady growth in Aboriginal higher education (Jordan, 1985). This was mainly facilitated by the National Aboriginal Education Committee's 1979 Aboriginal higher education policy to have 1 000 Aboriginal teachers trained by 1990, which was supported by the federal government of the day (Willmot, 1986).

This was an excellent strategy in one way because it ensured our presence in colleges of advanced education and institutes of technology. But it overshadowed the other areas of need for Aboriginal economic development and independence. It also resulted in neglect by the traditional universities which were very slow in opening their doors to Aborigines in any large numbers. Though it can be argued that every, university in the country now has an Aboriginal support program with a significant number of Aboriginal students, these programs have mainly been inherited through the amalgamation with the colleges of advanced education and institutes of technology. By 1988 the number of programs had increased to 42 and the following year, 1989, there were 62 programs actively operating around the nation.

Aboriginal participation in higher education increased from 72 enrolments in 1972 to 4 087 in 1991 (see Table 1). Despite this drastic increase Aboriginal students only account for one per cent of the national higher education enrolments. They are over represented in education and the arts including humanities (see Figure 1), and are under represented in engineering, health, business, economics, management and science. This highlights the fact that Aboriginal higher education had its genesis, and is still fundamentally located, in previous colleges of advanced education and the social science departments of institutes of technology. I am not advocating that we should be restricting enrolments in teaching and the arts and humanities. I believe that there needs to be a concentrated effort by universities to get Aborigines enrolled across all disciplines. Results from research

undertaken on staff working in Aboriginal higher education programs, and an identified group of students and graduates show that the professional aspirations of Aborigines are similar to those of the wider community (Bin-Sallik, 1990).

### **Aborigines and Universities**

The success of the development of the Aboriginal higher education sector was due to the initiatives taken by Aborigines in the late seventies; when there were only three support programs, two in South Australia and one in Western Australia, serving the needs of the entire Aboriginal population. For the majority there was no choice but to travel interstate to undertake tertiary studies.

I have worked in the Aboriginal higher education sector since 1975 so I speak from personal experiences and observation. For many students this meant uprooting and re-locating their families motivated by the desire to achieve; knowing that this may be their last chance at gaining appropriate qualifications, or their last chance at getting themselves off the dole queue.

Some students gave up their jobs in pursuit of an education; others were unemployed and felt they had nothing to lose, a significant number had only ever experienced failure and felt that they too had nothing to lose. This took enormous courage especially given that these people had all been casualties of Australia's education system.

- Can you begin to imagine what it would have been like for students arriving in a strange city with a family, faced with the daunting task of trying to secure accommodation only to be turned away time and time again because of the colour of their skin?
- Can you imagine the students who had never lived in, or had ever seen a city in their lives, trying to cope with the culture shock?
- Can you image the feelings of isolation and the stress on families not having their extended families to support them?

It was because of the courage of those early students and programs that the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) was able to successfully lobby the federal government to inject more funds into Aboriginal higher education, and to lobby other tertiary institutions to implement similar programs that we are now able to access higher education in our own states or territories.

We Aborigines are well aware that even if the education system was to change overnight to meet the needs of our children it would take at least three generations before it had any positive impact on our communities. We cannot afford to wait for the education system to get its act together. We cannot afford to stand by and watch our people being thrown on the scrap heap of human morbidity.

### **Aboriginal Intellectual Life**

At this point I would ask you to reflect upon the cultural and intellectual life of Aboriginal people as they endured the colonial process.

In the post colonial contact period the Aboriginal nations that had survived found themselves living in the 'dark ages' of Aboriginal intellectualism, only participating in their own cultural and intellectual life on those rare occasions when they could escape colonial observance. Aborigines were denied any form of intellectual integration into British society. Some Aborigines were eventually taught the very basics of numeracy and literacy. In instances where there were hints that Aborigines could cope with tertiary education, the impulse to offer it was quelled by culturally

biased IQ tests which were used to legitimate exclusion. It was not until the late sixties and early seventies that any hope for a Renaissance of Aboriginal intellectual and cultural heritage appeared.

In traditional life there were many highly skilled people—not only doctors and lawyers, but teachers, geographers, chemists, botanists, and people trained in communications (not only with the living, but also with nature and the spirit world). We had linguists, historians ... it was the life time duty of some people to carry the whole knowledge of each subject and pass it on to whoever would be replacing them (Sykes, 1986, 30).

Australia was a land of philosophers whose view of " ... the universe, life and the past, present and future was expressed in the rites and myths, conduct and in beliefs about themselves" (Elkin, 1986, 220). Intellectual life was dominated by matters of grave mythical and theological importance. Contemplating and exploring the mythology of the forces of creation consumed much of the time that men and women spent away from the mundane. Indeed, even the round of everyday life was suffused with spiritual shades of meaning. What is probably the oldest continuously practised religion in the world was part of the intellectual heritage that Aboriginal people had to share with humanity (Willmot, 1987). That it was everyone's preoccupation to learn and constantly reaffirm this spirituality meant that surpluses of food and labour were not created for material or status advancement. From childhood through adult life, everyone was required to pass through rites of passage to increasingly sophisticated levels of spiritual awareness (Elkin, 1986; R

M and C H Berndt, 1977). Elkin stated:

... there is little doubt that the Aboriginal philosopher finds plenty of material on which to exercise his thought, his analytical powers, and his urge for systematic and logical construction (Elkin, 1968, 220).

He also asserted:

The primitive medicine man is no mere quack, nor is his profession easily come by. He must be trained and disciplined ... the modern medicine man, in spite of all his knowledge, is surely a lineal descendent (Elkin quoted by Wise, 1985, 246).

Confronted with a nation of philosophers, the belligerent British saw only ignorance (Broome, 1982, 89, 91). Thus began the wholesale denigration of Aboriginal intellectual and cultural worth (Hughes, 1986, 272). Little credence was given to Aboriginal intellectual life, and their encyclopaedic knowledge of the 'new' land. As explorers crossed the continent there was no mention of the Aboriginal guides and diplomats who paved the way for these first tourists.

In the 1960s the work of Professor Elkin, who followed Radcliffe Brown to the first Chair in Anthropology in Australia, received recognition. Due to the growing body of knowledge accumulated by Elkin and his followers, subjects about Aborigines began to proliferate in schools of anthropology in Australian universities in the 1960s. But, nowhere was the celebration of Aboriginal culture extended to Aborigines. It was about us and not for us. We had to wait until the mid-seventies before we were able to contribute to the intellectual life of this country in significant numbers with the development of the Aboriginal higher education sector.

I believe that one of the major tragedies of colonised peoples is that their colonisers have concentrated on educating the children, thus taking away the rights of the adults who in all societies are responsible for imparting knowledge to the next generation. Can you begin to understand how demoralising this has been for Aborigines? For over two hundred years there has been the pattern of watching our children being educated into an alien society, and in many instances not understanding exactly what they are learning, or not being able to assist them with certain educational tasks or give

advice. This has also been quite devastating for the children and I speak from experience as a school drop out.

By enrolling in higher education Aborigines are re-claiming their role as the providers of knowledge and providing their families with educational role models. And as equally important we are re-claiming our rightful role of participating in the intellectual life of this country. The heritage which has been rightfully ours from time immemorial.

So one could argue that the higher education sector is putting role models in Aboriginal homes and families. It does not matter whether these role models are parents, siblings or other members of families and extended families. The importance lies in the fact that Aboriginal adults and children have role models from within their own family structures. To give you a couple of examples:

1. An Aboriginal woman in her late fifties along with her brother who was a retired train driver in his sixties enrolled in an associate diploma. Their role model was her son who was in the final year of his business degree.
2. A young married woman with two children told me that she was able to cope with her studies and family life because she had applied the same organisational strategies that her mother had used some 10 years earlier.

There is evidence to show that there are now familial links between students and graduates, and that generations are following one another very quickly into the higher education system.

The results of research undertaken for my doctoral thesis in 1988 show that graduates from the Aboriginal Task Force program, at what was the South Australian Institute of Technology, some of whom were either long term unemployed, or worked in unskilled jobs, were employed at significant levels within Aboriginal organisations and within the public sector agencies (Bin-Sallik, 1990). I am currently researching the impact of higher education on Aboriginal women which should be published next year. Preliminary analysis of the data show that since gaining university degrees these women were able to secure employment relatively easily. They were able to choose the areas in which they wanted to work and their earning capacity increased dramatically to what they were earning prior to studies. Some of their areas of employment are: the legal and primary and secondary teaching professions; academia; the public sector as well as Aboriginal organisations.

### **Universities and Aboriginal Self Determination**

In 1985 the Report of the Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs condemned the education sector for not responding to the economic needs, wishes and development of Aborigines. It asserted that priority should be given to the labour market and employment conditions and prospects because: (a) a large number of qualified Aborigines were urgently needed at all levels of the Aboriginal industry to promote a better service delivery; (b) Aborigines needed to be given the opportunity of realising their aspirations across a broad range of professional areas relating to the labour market; and (c) the majority of Aborigines were located on the outskirts of large towns and cities where agriculture, fishing, mining and tourism were the major industries, and that these people urgently needed commercial, financial management and marketing and technical expertise (Miller et al, 1985, 221-25). That was eight years ago, and to date change has been very slow.

With the high demand for Aboriginal professionals I believe that universities have a critical role to play in relation to Aboriginal self determination. Given the appalling health conditions in which our people live and the alarming numbers of Aboriginal deaths in police custody there is a high demand

for doctors, dentists, nurses and lawyers. Aboriginal architects and town planners too are urgently needed in Aboriginal communities. There is also an urgent need for Aboriginal professionals in mining and engineering and environmental science. Indeed Aboriginal communities need the same range of professionals as the wider community. Until this happens the inequities will persist.

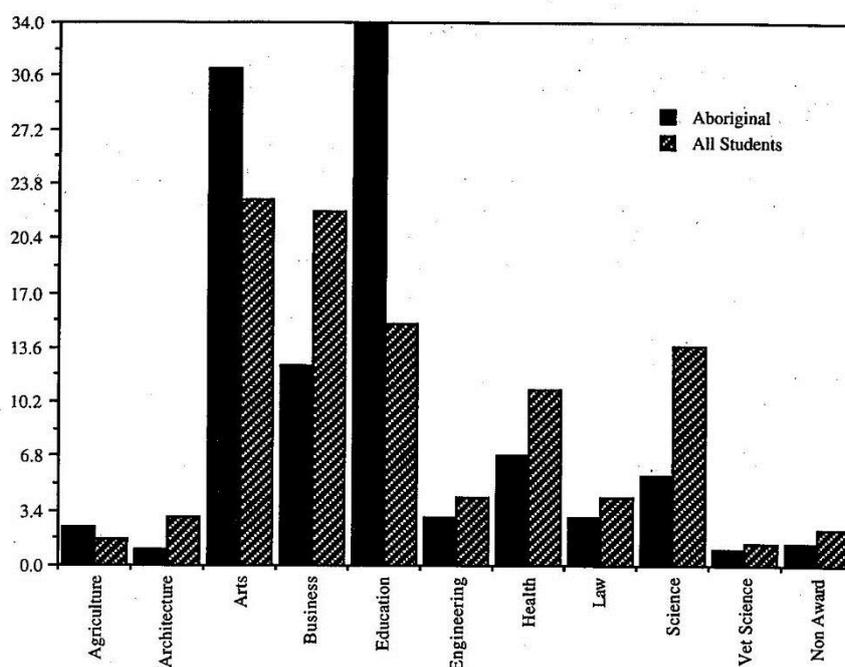
This of course poses a challenge to universities across the nation to respond to the needs of Australia's indigenous people. Although universities have begun to open their doors to us they have yet to become key players in Aboriginal self determination. To do this they have to be prepared to change from within and even question some of their traditional pedagogies and practices.

There is now a significant number of Aboriginal parents who have graduated from universities and this is having an impact on their children who are now enrolled in higher education. This is the first time ever that this has happened. This then generates a real challenge for universities as to what is expected of them as they become major players in the process of significant change within Aboriginal communities. With the increasing number of Aboriginal enrolments and the growing diversity of courses in which these students are enrolling, institutions need to be looking at how they are to become participants in Aboriginal self determination, and that's partly what they are teaching, and how they are teaching it.

They also have to think about their role in a much broader sense—as institutions heavily involved in constructing knowledge, in determining what kind of knowledge they are constructing, and what responsibilities they have in relation to Aborigines. Universities do not have a good record in creating images of Aboriginality and still treat Aborigines as objects of study rather than participants in research. But times are changing, and certainly at the cutting edge of all this must be the social sciences, anthropology, history, archaeology, health, psychology, law, engineering, architecture, mining and geology. These are all the areas that have an impact on Aboriginal lives.

It is not simply a question of whether Aborigines and universities are compatible. The fact of the matter is that Aborigines know the importance to their communities of having qualified professionals among their own people. The important question for Aboriginal people is: how long will it be before universities acknowledge that they must be major players in Aboriginal self determination?

Until all Australian universities, through the Vice-Chancellors' Committee, undertake a proper assessment of their responsibilities towards the indigenous peoples of this country and their cultures, Australia will continue to be without a valid culture of its own, and Aborigines will remain the most disadvantaged group of people in this country.



**Figure 1. Distribution of Aboriginal and All Students by Broad Field of Study, 1991 (%)** Source: DEET (1992)

**Table 1**

**Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Students in Higher Education, 1982-91**

Year	Total
1972	72
1979	748
1982	854
1987	1 933
1988	2 565
1989	3 307
1990	3 607
1991	4 807

Source: Bourke, Farrow, McConnochie & Tucker (1990); DEET (1992)

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