

Indigenous researchers reflect at the Indigenous Research Forum

Robyn Ober & Dr. Lyn Fasoli

Introduction

Indigenous researchers from all over Australia gathered at Alice Springs in July this year to share their knowledge and questions at the recent Indigenous Research Forum. During a workshop at the beginning of the conference, participants identified a number of critical research issues reflecting the current concerns, needs and gaps in research concerning Indigenous people. The following is a summary of the issues they prioritised and that subsequently guided many of the discussions held over the next two days of the conference.

Indigenous research issues beyond the cities

Until recently there have been few opportunities for Indigenous researchers to get together and discuss their issues within a solely Indigenous-focused forum. However, new conferences and forums are beginning to emerge where these discussions can take place. Forum participants expressed the need to coordinate national forums for Indigenous research to ensure that they do not clash with each other and that they are spread out across the year, to enable the relatively small numbers of Indigenous researchers to take advantage of every opportunity to work collaboratively.

Robyn Ober is a Murri woman from North Queensland with cultural connections with Djirribal people from North Queensland through her mother and KuKuYalandji through her father. Robyn is an experienced educator, having taught in both primary and tertiary education in both remote and urban contexts. Robyn is currently undertaking studies in the Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Knowledge through Bachelor Institute and has recently graduated from Charles Darwin University as their first Indigenous graduate in the Masters of Applied linguistics.

Dr. Lyn Fasoli has worked in the field of early childhood for over 30 years, most of them in the Northern Territory, Australia. She is an educator, researcher and consultant and has published numerous articles, nationally and internationally. She teaches courses in early childhood education at Bachelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education where she is also a senior researcher. Her research interests include remote Indigenous community children's services, Indigenous leadership and early childhood play. She continues to learn, most recently from her colleagues and students as well as her four grandsons.

Another issue related to the relatively small number of Indigenous researchers is the authentic engagement of researchers with Indigenous participants. Too often, particularly in remote community contexts, the first points of contact for Indigenous participants in a research project are not the researchers themselves. New research projects are routinely introduced to participants by second-hand interpreters of the research. These can include employees of Land Councils, a research assistant, a school principal or a community administrator. Remoteness from researchers, who usually reside in cities and universities, means that someone local must be found on the ground in the community where the research is to take place to make the first approach. There were concerns expressed about the degree to which such people can/should be expected to interpret to potential participants the purposes, methods and ethical issues associated with a research project. Yet without a go-between, many researchers would not access remote contexts and many remotely located participants would not have a voice. The question remains, *can such people truly gain informed consent from participants about whether the project should be undertaken in their community?* It would be preferable for the researcher to be doing this preparation work. Because most researchers are outsiders to the communities in which they seek to do their research, they rely on these second hand interpreters and this creates a difficult and potentially untenable situation. The ideal situation is for local Indigenous community members to undertake research for and by themselves, rather than as co-researchers located at a distance from the primary researchers. This is increasingly becoming possible as more remotely located researchers become qualified to undertake research. Many researchers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, are using participatory action research methodologies that rely on prior connections and relationships between researchers and participants located in remote communities. These methodologies appear to hold the most promise for engaging authentically with remote community co-researchers and participants.

As an extension of this theme, many forum participants felt that 'metro-centric' views of research were dominating the Indigenous research agenda. This results in the underrepresentation of the views of rural and regional Indigenous researchers, especially those in remote locations.

Indigenous researchers and participants located in remote areas of Australia experience many difficulties in accessing the internet and other forms of technology taken for granted by researchers working in cities. The ability of remote and regional Indigenous researchers to access these resources was seen as a significant barrier to their participation in current research practice, training and networking with others. Access to these resources could potentially create important links between remote areas Indigenous researchers and improve Indigenous research practice. This infrastructure must be made a priority.

Future research

For many years, Indigenous researchers have been challenging traditional ways of doing research. These include the domination of non-Indigenous researchers undertaking research with Indigenous people and the lack of ethical research practice. Despite much progress in recent years, many problems remain and forum participants highlighted the need to continue the work of moving beyond traditional research approaches.

The need to involve more young Indigenous researchers was identified as one way forward in changing the research culture dominated by non-Indigenous researchers. The question was asked: *As practicing Indigenous researchers, what is our responsibility to look back over our shoulders to ensure that there are people to take our places?* We need to get the message out to established Indigenous researchers that they have responsibilities for mentoring and supporting young Indigenous researchers.

Forum participants expressed concerns as well as seeing some opportunities presented by the new DEST Research Quality Framework (RQF). It was acknowledged that the RQF, because it recognises new ways of determining research 'impact', could be very beneficial to Indigenous communities where significant change and lasting benefit to these communities as a result of research activities have often been lacking. We need to use this change in national funding for research to support Indigenous research.

Funding Issues

How can we find/organise more funding for Indigenous researchers to participate in conferences?

Could we seek sponsorship for research students to enable them to attend these kinds of forums? How do we get this kind of support from the universities who employ them?

Often research granting institutions 'capture' researchers with their money, and then dictate their agenda for research. We need to be aware of this. What can we do about this issue?

Supervision

Indigenous supervision training for non-Indigenous research supervisors is a critical area of need. What would be required to make this happen?

How can we be lateral in the ways we think about supervision and negotiate supervision relationships, early in the relationship?

More supervision of Indigenous students by Indigenous senior people is needed. How do we build this capacity?

Collaborative research

Often Indigenous researchers are invited to participate in 'collaborative' projects but only as an 'add-on' researcher, rather than being given an opportunity to initiate and truly collaborate. *How can we push our own ideas in the collaborative situation? How can we change this situation?* It seems obvious that we need to strengthen and support the networking opportunities for Indigenous researchers to enable more mutually beneficial collaboration to occur.

The Indigenous Research Forum is an opportunity for celebrating and supporting Indigenous post graduate students and bringing them together with the kind of experienced and accomplished researchers they can become one day. We all need to make the mentoring, promotion and support of post graduate students a priority and find ways to enable them to participate in this important forum.