

# Looking for the invisible: The case of EALD Indigenous students in higher education

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English language proficiency (ELP) has long been acknowledged as an important element for success in higher education in Australia and elsewhere. A consolidated directive to support and foster this was presented to Australian universities by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA, 2009) in the form of the Good Practice Principles (GPP). The English Language Standards for Higher Education (ELSHE) developed in 2010 (DEEWR, 2010) further elaborated the roles of education providers. Somewhat parallel to this, the Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) identified Indigenous students as one of the most disadvantaged groups in Australian higher education, and consequently the Behrendt Review (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012) mentioned English language proficiency as a key challenge for Indigenous students in Australia. However, in these and other relevant reports, the cohort of Indigenous students who speak English as an additional language or dialect (EALD), a significant group experiencing ultimate disadvantage, remains invisible. This paper will attempt to identify the evidence of in/visibility of this cohort in the literature and consider the implications.

**Key Words:** EALD, ELP, Indigenous, Higher Education.

## 1. Introduction

The scholarly field around English language is extensive and specialisations such as English as a Second Language (ESL), Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB), English as an Additional Language and/or Dialect (EALD) and English Language Learners (ELLs) are areas linked to the complex and mostly unavoidable English language interface that many who speak a non-English language as their first language have to negotiate in today's world. These areas, individually and collectively, have received serious academic attention over the past several decades. Innumerable research papers, theses and books that have been published in these areas.

Given that academic research engineers an incremental accumulation of knowledge (Reuber, 2010), and the published literature provides access to this knowledge, an investigatory perusal of literature about a specific area of research can help identify the key areas of research interest, effort and findings. The amount of reference to a particular field of research would indicate the research based knowledge about that field, and thus an absence of any considerable quantity or quality of reference to any particular field would help the knowledge gap to emerge and be identified.

Within the context of Indigenous higher education in Australia, the case of EALD Indigenous students at universities warrants solemn attention for reasons discussed below. A brief analysis

of the related research indicates only a nominal focus on Indigenous students' English language proficiency and has implications for their higher education.

This paper will examine the extent of invisibility of research interest and policy focus on ELP of EALD students with a particular focus on Indigenous education in Australia.

## 2. EALD in Australia – From school to university

The term EALD is fairly new in academic circles and, perhaps due to the artificial feel of homogeneity the terms that preceded EALD, especially ESL, had provided, it is difficult to produce an historical timeline that reflects the evolution of this concept. A general consideration of the key educational policy cornerstones is proposed to help trace an approximate genesis of EALD and allied policies. A significant aspect of educational policy outlook could be traced back to landmark national educational policies Australia adopted since the *National Goals for Schooling in Australia* (the Hobart Declaration) in 1989 (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 1989). This was superseded by the *National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* (the Adelaide Declaration) (MCEETYA, 1999), and this in turn was superseded by the *Educational Goals for Young Australians* (the Melbourne Declaration) (MCEETYA, 2008) almost a decade later. Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008 (MCEETYA, 2006) seems to be one of the earliest significant literatures to include a clear identification and inclusion of EALD backgrounds of Indigenous students.

The Melbourne Declaration (2008) aspired to “provide all students with access to high-quality schooling that is free from discrimination based on gender, language, sexual orientation, pregnancy, culture, ethnicity, religion, health or disability, socioeconomic background or geographic location” (p. 7) and it admitted the failure in improving educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians and aspired to ensure their learning outcomes were comparable to those of their peers (Goal 1: page 7). Like the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008) of the same year, it acknowledged low socioeconomic background as a disadvantage. The Australian Curriculum by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) was established in 2008 (ACARA, 2009a) as a direct outcome of the Melbourne Declaration.

The declaration did not take into consideration the complex and varied linguistic backgrounds of young Australians and the practical barriers they are bound to have to negotiate in an English only education system. It paved the way for the establishment of ACARA which began reflecting the description *English as a second language or dialect* (ESLD) that appeared in *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008* (MCEETYA, 2006, p. 19). Even though students from EALD background were clearly acknowledged, the English centric policy approach maintained that English should remain the only core language of and for education.

One of the earliest policy documents from ACARA, *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) reaffirmed that preliminary “and major and continuing literacy development will be in English” (p. 12). It stated that the National Curriculum will aspire to optimise the opportunities for all students, and those from non-English speaking backgrounds were to be provided additional resources to help “them to master the language demands of school subjects” (Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p. 10). The first notable mention of the term *English as an Additional Language or Dialect* (EALD) in Australia's National Curriculum can be found in Version 2.0 of *the Shape of the Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, 2010). Nakata (2011) observed that the acknowledgement by ACARA and the Australian Curriculum of EALD Indigenous students was very positive for Indigenous people and education in general, as the consideration for EALD students' learning needs became formally embedded in the National Curriculum.

The Review of *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008* (Buckskin, 2009) recommended specialist training for teachers to teach EALD students and noted that the positive approach of providing experienced and able teachers along with an appropriate pedagogical approach is rarely available for Indigenous students. *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010 – 2014* (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Develop-

ment and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA), 2010) also remained somewhat committed to EALD, and it was in the review of this plan (ACIL ALLEN Consulting, 2014) that EALD became clearly identified and relevant to remote Indigenous students.

Established as part of MCEETYA's four year plan 2009-2012 (MCEETYA, 2009), ACARA (2009b) set out various strategies in this plan. ACARA initiated and managed the establishment of a National Curriculum for Australian schools, and among the many key strategies it adopted, the provision of specialist training to teach English as a second language (ESL) for teachers of EALD Indigenous students (ACARA, 2009b, p.27) is significant in this context. Hammond (2012) opined that this offers significant hope for Australian EALD students.

It has been pointed out that ACARA, by bringing EALD into the spotlight in the National Curriculum, "has once more placed the educational needs and outcomes of refugee and immigrant students on the national mainstream teaching agenda in Australia" (De Courcy, Adoniou, & Ngoc, 2014, p. 74). However, the Indigenous EALD cohort has little visibility in this discourse. In line with the objective of this paper, the case of EALD Indigenous students in the context of Australian higher education needs to be considered.

### 3. The Indigenous situation in Australian higher education

Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Australian universities speak many languages and many of them speak a language other than English at home. A large number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (collectively identified as Indigenous in this paper) students do not speak Standard Australian English (SAE) as their first language. Similarly, the large and increasing cohorts of international students and students from migrant communities speak their heritage languages at home. They all learn, speak and use English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD). EALD "includes simultaneous as well as sequential acquisition of SAE as another dialect or language and in any Australian school learning context" (Angelo, 2013, p. 68), and EALD Indigenous students would have followed this pathway to acquire SAE.

Among Indigenous people in Australia, approximately 17% do not speak English as the dominant language at home (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009, p. 14). Therefore there could be a considerable number of Indigenous students from EALD backgrounds in Australian schools and universities. These students are likely to have traditional Indigenous languages, Creole languages or Aboriginal English as their first language (Queensland Department of Education and Training (QDET), 2013), and they may speak Aboriginal English, Creole, one or more Indigenous languages or a combination thereof (MCEETYA, 2006, p. 17). Through the analysis of school language data, Dixon and Angelo (2014) discussed the invisibility of EALD Indigenous learners of Australian Standard English at Queensland schools, and it is reasonable to assume that the plight of their counterparts in other states and territories would be very similar.

There is limited, if any, acknowledgement of the linguistic complexity of the EALD Indigenous student cohort in policy literature. This lack of acknowledgement is evident through the school education sector. Furthermore, this perceived ignorance about an important cohort of students stretches deep into Australian higher education. The EALD Indigenous student cohort is not only under acknowledged but such students are also misrepresented as part of the English speaking mainstream. The literature about EALD Indigenous students in Australian school education reveals their misrepresentation as non-EALD students (Malcolm, 2011a), long term underuse of EALD resources (De Courcy et al. , 2014) and use of invalid assessment tools for identification and assessment of EALD Indigenous students (Angelo, 2013).

Education is seen as a means of providing equity for Indigenous people. English as the only language of instruction in Australian education system is the key medium to access education monopolised by western constructs. Any obstruction, linguistic or otherwise, between the EALD Indigenous students and their desirable education will only serve to fail the noble sounding agendas of bridging the gap, widening participation and increasing social equity.

Historically, Indigenous students in Australia have been severely disadvantaged, and EALD Indigenous students often come from regional and remote Australia, which multiplies their disadvantages. Indigeneity, remoteness and low socioeconomic background have been identified as

markers of significant disadvantage (Bradley et al., 2008) and many EALD Indigenous students encounter these three impairments. It should then be of no surprise that EALD Indigenous students belong to the group of lowest achieving students in Australia. Australian Indigenous students' lower educational achievements "are marked particularly by their low socioeconomic status, and their ethnicity, either as indigenous students or immigrant students" (De Courcy et al., 2014, p. 74).

Language issues in education could be systemic and deep rooted. The schools education sector contains the foundation of issues related to EALD backgrounds. For the EALD Indigenous students, learning (including the acquisition of literacy) is presented in a foreign language or dialect and they may never succeed in overcoming this "educational hurdle" effectively (Malcolm 2011a, p. 3). Unfortunately, this issue also remains embedded in the higher education sector. Research and academic attention to this field is still emerging. Chanock and Bartlett (2003) over a decade ago provided exclusive focus on Australian students from non-English speaking backgrounds (ANESBs) and how they negotiated English as the medium of instruction. They were perhaps the first to assert that the academic skills and learning needs of these students need to be addressed "within the context of second language issues, differing cultural backgrounds and differing educational experiences" (p. 4). This logic should also prevail while analysing issues pertaining to Indigenous students, especially those from EALD backgrounds.

The EALD related research has increased in recent years. With regards to Indigenous students and teaching and assessment of English language at schools, Malcolm (2011b) observed that they "are particularly vulnerable, since they constitute, in most cases, a small minority of school populations and they are often incorrectly assumed to be native speakers of standard Australian English" (p. 190). Furthermore, a recent project has evidenced that resources available for EALD learners have been underused for almost two decades (De Courcy et al., 2014) including the latest EAL/D [sic] Teachers Resource, companion to the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2012) meant for Australian schools including those with prospective EALD Indigenous higher education students.

Unfortunately, the misrepresentation of EALD Indigenous students as non-EALD in the Australian education system exists within school education (Malcolm, 2011a) and continues through to higher education. This also implies that the school education would have left these students disadvantaged with respect to the language of instruction, especially the acquisition of SAE. Angelo (2013, p. 69) concurred that a lack of "pivotal contextual understandings" of the complex language backgrounds, "identification...of learners can miss the mark – or not even see it" in the case of EALD Indigenous students. If "non-standard dialect speaking minorities fall behind their Standard English speaking peers in school achievement" (Malcolm, 2011a, p. 261) it can be deduced that this student cohort will also be disadvantaged in higher education unless they acquire appropriate and sufficient language skills, or relevant support is provided simultaneously with their studies at the university.

The disregard of their language background would not only have created gaps in knowledge and skills acquisition but also would have undermined Indigenous students' learning achievements due to the use of inappropriate or non-inclusive pedagogy and tools. Angelo (2013) observed that in the context of second language assessment tools in Australia, there has been a lack of acknowledgement of EALD Indigenous students' complex language situations.

There has been a proliferation of exploratory literature about Indigenous issues including matters related to Indigenous higher education. A government sponsored literature review relating to the current context and discourse of Indigenous Tertiary Education in Australia (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2011) is very significant in this regard as it identified current gaps in research. The review asserted that these gaps might indicate areas where "universities can best prepare Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students for future careers" (DEEWR, 2011, pp. 3-4) and as such these gaps warrant exploration.

*The Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* was commissioned to ensure "that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people share equally in the life chances that a quality university education provides" (Behrendt et al.,

2012). Yet issues of access and retention of rural and remote Indigenous students in higher education has had less of a research focus (DEEWR, 2011, p. 13), and O'Rourke and McInerney (2006) observed that available information about these issues is still limited.

#### 4. Through the reviews

The Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008) as a foundational document about Australian higher education could also be a key point of reference for Indigenous higher education. The review observed that Indigenous people are “disadvantaged by the circumstance of birth” (p. xi) and paid attention to the significance of Indigenous participation and inclusion of Indigenous knowledges in academia. Attention to Indigenous specific needs and realities also came through the insight into aspects of access and participation from national and international perspectives. However, the review did not identify the EALD Indigenous cohort; hence their context and needs remained entirely invisible.

Effectively addressing Indigenous students' needs, including those from an EALD background, is the key to making progress towards suggested targets in the Bradley Review. It recommended greater support for Indigenous students, among other low SES groups, to improve their access to higher education. The review also found that while Indigenous access was a major issue, academic success remained an equally significant issue with many students leaving university without attaining the criteria for an award. Addressing this issue should be of highest priority since it is the current system that is contributing to their failure. Unfortunately, this avoidable failure could also contribute to the depletion of self-confidence and self-worthiness of these students who suffer social exclusion when they become failed models for their communities.

The Bradley Review recommended regular review of Indigenous participation with advice from the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC). It also argues for the removal of financial barriers, but there is no mention of language barriers. Indigenous access and participation in higher education receives sufficient attention throughout the review. Without doubt, greater identification of EALD Indigenous students will be able to provide more information about their participation and performance in higher education, thus providing potential policy directions.

*“Can't be what you can't see”: the transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to higher education* (Kinnane, Wilson, Hughes & Thomas 2014a, 2014b) is a recent report that investigated key matters related to Indigenous transition into higher education. This extensive literature review (Kinnane et al., 2014a) is a consolidation of current research, investigations and policies. It refers to the establishment of National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS) (p. 83) and the controversial Four Hours English Only Policy of 2008 in the Northern Territory.

The final report (Kinnane et al., 2014b) is free of any reference to the role English language proficiency plays in the Indigenous student transition to higher education. There is no reference to English as the language of instruction, to the complex makeup of EALD student backgrounds, nor is there acknowledgement of the existence of EALD Indigenous student cohorts in higher education. This indicates a systemic blindness.

The Behrendt Review of 2012 has been the most significant literature about Australian Indigenous higher education to date. The review aimed “to achieve parity in higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff” (p. 11), and the review panel aspired to “to see the higher education sector playing a leading role in building capacity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities” (p. 11). Notably it acknowledged the lack of English language proficiency as a key challenge to Indigenous student success in higher education and has a reference to the ‘block release’ program at Curtin University where isolated and disadvantaged students are provided support “to adapt to a new language and academic culture” (pp. 184-186). EALD Indigenous students and the impact of their language backgrounds have eluded this landmark review as is true of all other relevant and related literature.

## **5. ELP in Australian higher education**

A comprehensive evaluation of the context of English language proficiency in higher education is found in Arkoudis, Baik and Richardson (2012). Moore (2012) outlined the ELP policy framework in Australia; however, the relevant documents predominantly focussed on international students from EALD backgrounds.

In Australia, where the language of instruction is English, EALD students are disadvantaged. Arkoudis (2013), found that students, both international and others, from language backgrounds other than English had performed below domestic students at university. Furthermore, Birrell's (2006) study found that attending an English speaking university did not ensure improvement in the ELP of international students who spoke a language other than English at home. While EALD students have traditionally achieved less than the native speakers in tertiary education (Chanock & Bartlett, 2003), students who come from the same ethnic, class and linguistic backgrounds as their professors are actually in a privileged position with regard to their potential for academic success (Matsuda & Jablonski, 1998). This underlines the inherent disadvantage EALD Indigenous students have to negotiate before they commence their higher education in a Western education system where English is the only language of instruction. Given the inevitability of English as the language of instruction (LOI) in higher education in Australia and given the special case of EALD Indigenous students in Australian universities, a dedicated policy focus seems clearly indispensable.

A brief analysis of a range of key policy documents below accentuates the evidence of identification and hence acknowledgement of the in/visible cohort of EALD Indigenous students. Although EALD Indigenous and non-Indigenous students existed prior to the influx of international students into institutions of higher education in Australia, it is noteworthy that English language proficiency as an educational factor gained attention much earlier in the context of overseas or international students.

International or immigrant students have been the main focus of English language education and support in the Australian education system. For decades English language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) have been delivered by many English language centres around the country, while the Education Services of Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000 established the current regulatory mechanism for the provision of education to international students which continues to underpin the statutory frameworks of Australian universities (University of Adelaide, 2014). The ESOS National Code 2007 Standard 2.2 requires course providers to ensure that the English Language proficiency of the students offered a place is appropriate for the course. These frameworks were set to benefit the very large number of international students from EALD backgrounds, yet these standards do not apply to domestic students (Department of Education and Training (DET), 2011).

The Good Practice Principles (GPP) for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities (DEEWR 2009) articulated the commitment to ensuring quality English language education and support for EALD international and domestic students and English Language Standards for Higher Education (ELSHE). It was convened by the Australian University Quality Agency (AUQA) (see DEEWR 2010) and later these standards were made legislative instruments within the purview of ESOS legislation (The Education and Early Childhood Services Registration and Standards Board of South Australia (EECSRSB), 2014).

Despite this, traditionally, institutions of higher education in Australia “have not viewed English language learning as a priority for policy practice; and not addressing this issue can disadvantage EAL[D] students” (Arkoudis et al., 2012, p. 2). This does not mean that there were no investments made in resources to support English language needs of the students. Such “resources remain marginalised and under-resourced, tangential to the curriculum rather than centralised” (Arkoudis et al., 2012, p. 2). Some recent positive developments pertaining to ELP support as discussed by Beatty, Collins and Buckingham (2014) and Johnson, Veitch and Dewiyanti (2015) indicate current evidence based initiatives to address issues related to ELP by embedding English language teaching into the curriculum in selected Australian universities.

As such, the awareness, initiatives, resources, policy directions and legislations regarding English language proficiency in higher education seem to be focussed on and developed around EALD International students at higher education institutions in Australia. It is needless to say that EALD Indigenous students remain convincingly invisible in this context. Other avenues to investigate the presence of EALD Indigenous students in higher education would be the policy literature specific to Indigenous students in Australian higher education and following is a brief analysis of a few documents of significance.

## 6. EALD – Missing in Indigenous higher education

While there seem to be a wide range of topics related to Indigenous issues being explored at Australian universities (Frawley & Wolfe, 2009), insufficient attention given to issues related to the medium of instruction in higher education for EALD Indigenous students indicates a significant research gap in Indigenous higher education and education reform. This has implications for the empowerment of Indigenous people since Battiste (2002) has related a heightened interest in areas of research relevant to Indigenous people as “an act of empowerment” (p. 4).

Although as O’Rourke (2008) pointed out, overall educational disadvantage of Indigenous students is evident in the higher education sector, the issues for EALD Indigenous students surrounding English as the medium of access and instruction in higher education did not emerge among the perceived institutional barriers identified in O’Rourke’s study with 36 participants. Perhaps this was because the aspect of EALD background and its implications never emerged in the thoughts of the researcher or the participants. Instead, support from the university and a lack of tertiary level study skills emerged as the key institutional barriers. The Indigenous students were compared with international students, yet, the possible similarities in their English language backgrounds were not mentioned (O’Rourke, 2008).

It is evident that the same motives and self-beliefs influence both Indigenous and non-Indigenous student backgrounds in education (McInerney, 2001). Besides providing sufficient access to higher education, the success of Indigenous students has also come into focus. This success will indeed depend on “a new paradigm for research in Indigenous higher education student equity in Australia” as Devlin (2009, p. 1) argued. The success of Indigenous students can be enhanced only by “innovative research support” (Day, 2007, p. 14) that addresses their actual needs. Given that Indigenous students engage with learning similarly or more effectively than non-Indigenous students (Asmar, Page, & Radloff, 2011) all stakeholders of Indigenous higher education collectively become responsible for the provision of needs-based research to support this student cohort to overcome their multiple disadvantages including any language barriers. This moral responsibility towards EALD Indigenous students could be fulfilled with an approach on the lines of emerging practices Murray (2010) has outlined wherein universities evaluate their English language provision, pre-enrolment screening, earliest post-enrolment needs assessment, and provision of effective support to those insufficient language skills.

There is a wide range of a research pertaining to various aspects of access, participation, retention, and success of Indigenous students in higher education, and area-specific research spans the fields of health, education, the arts, social studies and humanities, and Indigenous studies. English language support must fundamentally be at the centre of university focus since EALD Indigenous students, like other EALD students, can access the curriculum with high expectations only if they have acquired sufficient language skills. This support is not just an issue about equity as it should be part of core university business (Andersen, Bunda, & Walter, 2008). Yet, the issue of the medium of instruction and its implication for EALD Indigenous students remains invisible.

Since the beginning of this decade there has been an enhanced interest and dedicated focus on Indigenous higher education in Australia. The *Background paper on Indigenous Australian Higher Education: Trends, Initiatives and Policy Implications* (Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011) at the beginning of this decade set the tone and laid the foundation for the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt et al., 2012), perhaps the single most significant evaluation of the context of Indigenous Higher Edu-

cation in Australia to date. Earlier in 2005, a report by the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) underlined the importance of increased Indigenous access to higher education in lessening their inherent disadvantage (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006). The background paper above reiterated the significance of education as the critical instrument to mitigate the disadvantage (Hunter & Schwab, 2003) of Indigenous people in Australia. The background paper had the purpose of providing “an overview of the current trends and issues in Indigenous higher education and contribute towards a discussion of possible solutions” (Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011, p. 2) yet the discourse therein is devoid of any reference to matters or issues related to the students’ language backgrounds or the language of instruction. Despite this, it asserts the need for “a more effective institutional response to the lack of adequate tertiary preparation of Indigenous students” (p. 3).

*The Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt et al., 2012) provided an extremely elaborate analysis of the access and outcomes of Indigenous students in Australian higher education. The review acknowledges the presence of an EALD (non-English speaking) cohort among the domestic undergraduate students. It also presents “a lack of English language proficiency” (p. 184) as one of the five key challenges in Indigenous higher education. ELP is only one of the many potential barriers EALD students confront: Bin-Sallik (2000), Biddle, Hunter and Schwab (2004), and Andersen, Bunda et al. (2008) all have identified and analysed other barriers between Indigenous students and higher education, but the English language barrier remains a startlingly invisible barrier.

It emerges from the above consideration of key literature relevant to Australian higher education that Indigenous higher education has received considerable attention from the academy and the policy makers. A clear consensus about the need to address key issues hampering the progress in Indigenous access, participation and success is also evident. Yet, barring an occasional reference to ELP as a challenge to Indigenous students (Behrendt et al., 2012), the English language backgrounds of Indigenous students as a significant factor remains submerged and hidden among other acknowledged fundamental factors for greater access and participation.

Nakata (2011, p. 3) stated “that successful management of the language issues is critical to all Indigenous students’ success wherever they are socially or educationally located” and that “English language skills are fundamental to the education of Indigenous students” (p. 3). Green (2015) asserted that ethnicity and English proficiency “had independent and additive prediction of weaker performance in all years of the programme, and were also predictive of progress issues, such as failing papers or having to repeat a year” (p. 223). It was affirmed that the factors of language proficiency and ethnicity while contributing to underperformance also increased their negative influence as time progressed (Green, 2015). Hence, for EALD Indigenous students, appropriate and sufficient support for their English language needs is essential to overcome current limitations.

Angelo (2013) rightly pointed out that although the *National Indigenous Reform Agreement* (NIRA) or *Closing the Gap* policy negotiated in 2008 is aimed at halving the gap in Indigenous student achievement, it did not make any reference to the cohort of EALD Indigenous students and their support needs. This is in alignment with other key educational policy documents that do not clearly identify the case of EALD Indigenous students, and hence do not provide EALD specific policy direction, the key to ameliorate the academic success of this student cohort.

## 7. Recommendations

Indigenous students are aware of the importance of education for themselves and their communities and consider higher education as a means to a better life and social equity (Herbert, 2005). Skene and Evamy (2009) identified education as the key driver to remedy the disadvantage of marginalised people including Indigenous Australians and stated that higher education institutions have a shared responsibility to provide opportunities to capable students. They also noted the impact of educational disadvantage in limiting the number of disadvantaged students gaining admissions to the eight elite Australian universities. However, through an analysis of Indigenous student data, Pechenkina, Kowal and Paradies (2011) identified a pattern wherein the



Group of Eight (Go8) universities exhibited better rates of completion for Indigenous students. It would be valuable to investigate what contributions English language proficiency might have made to this apparent success.

Positive connections between academic success and ELP have been found in the case of Wilson and Komba (2012), who in a study of secondary school students in Tanzania, found that ELP was one of the several variables that influenced academic success. The role of ELP has also been documented by Elder (1993), Johnson (1998), Green (2005) and more recently by Riazi (2013).

However, the issue “of identifying, assessing and attending to the language needs of EAL/D [sic] Indigenous speakers... is largely unacknowledged and unaddressed at the national policy level, but also within research discourses on (language) curriculum, pedagogy, data and assessment” (Angelo, 2013, p. 92). Angelo (2013) also points out that the cohort of TESOL experts and practitioners have supported international EALD students and this confined focus has restricted them from developing the expertise to address the specific needs of Indigenous EALD learners. It needs to be verified to what extent this distraction has contributed to the invisibility of EALD Indigenous students as a cohort that deserves due acknowledgement and specialist support. The aforementioned factors make and will continue to keep them invisible unless this systemic invisibility cloak that keeps EALD Indigenous students invisible is unveiled by targeted research.

Along with an improved awareness of Indigenous languages (see Simpson & Wigglesworth, 2008 and Wigglesworth, Simpson, & Loakes, 2011), a constantly emerging factor is an understanding of EALD Indigenous students and their backgrounds. There is also “a recognition of how these diverse language contexts impact on Indigenous EAL/D [sic] learners...” (Angelo, 2013, p. 69). Nguyen and Cairney (2013) have already suggested that educational experiences and outcomes for Indigenous students remain abysmal due to the (English) language barrier, encountered especially by Indigenous students from remote Australia. The significance of such connections and awareness could surely enable and empower Indigenous students, especially those from an EALD background and this should inform future research and policy directions.

## 8. Conclusion

It is clear that EALD Indigenous students in higher education remain under-supported and under-resourced as there are no government programs or policies dedicated to this cohort. Without such programs and dedicated services, the EALD learning needs of these students may not be recognised or addressed. This paper has shown, however, that there is emerging recognition of this cohort in recent literature. Such literature is crucial to the development of short and long term strategies to assist educators improve outcomes for EALD Indigenous students. It is important to reiterate that only if this cohort is recognised nationally with potential EALD needs will assistance strategies achieve their intended outcomes.

This paper has endeavoured to contextualise and establish the case of EALD Indigenous students in Australian higher education and has enabled a well-defined visibility of this student cohort. It is hoped that this emergent visibility of EALD Indigenous students would enable fresh research initiatives and that this paper will form the foundation for such future explorations.

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