

After 'Iso': The digital future of Indigenous academic mobility

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Abstract

In 2018 I commenced a full-time academic position in Sydney, New South Wales. Dharug Country, a 1,400-kilometre drive from my home, my family, and my community on Kaurna Country. I chose to embark upon a FIFO (fly-in, fly-out) arrangement for the foreseeable future. Flexibility from my family and my colleagues made this not-ideal arrangement workable. Three years later I have made many new friends, learned a lot about Dharug Nura, started building my career and have accumulated a considerable number of frequent flyer miles. This type of arrangement is not uncommon in academia, all but one of our full-time Indigenous department staff live outside of Sydney. However, much of the research into academic mobility and relocation has focussed on non-Indigenous experiences. As evidenced in the many innovations by members of the Forum for Indigenous Research Excellence, an international network of Indigenous academics, Indigenous academics are operating at the forefront of digital andragogy and research. As we begin to emerge from the lockdown imposed by coronavirus restrictions it is prudent to explore the possibilities for the future of academic work including working remotely and the affordances of digital communication technology. This paper, informed by a short-term autoethnographic reflection, will examine some of the specific social and cultural challenges and opportunities faced by Indigenous academics who travel frequently for academic employment.

After ‘Iso’: The digital future of Indigenous academic mobility

Introduction

Indigenous academics are acutely aware of the challenges related to academic mobility. Driven by an institutional desire to ‘internationalise’ higher education, academics are increasingly encouraged to travel for networking, conferences, and even to seek academic appointments. The changes to daily life presented by coronavirus and the associated government and health authority restrictions has turned the spotlight on the opportunities presented by digital communication technology for academics to navigate the complexities of an increasingly mobile workforce. Synchronous and asynchronous digital communication technologies have evolved across generations and have been deployed by many to great effect. Though it remains apparent that some in academia have merely acknowledged the existence of digital communication technology as a complementary sidenote and routinely ignored the possibilities in favour of traditional teaching and research. As we are fast learning, this is about to change. Many academics have been dragged, kicking and screaming in some cases, into the digital age as we face varying degrees of restriction on meetings, classes, examinations, and field research. This paper outlines some of the current challenges presented by social and travel restrictions and highlights some of the emergent innovations in academic work and Higher Degree Research (HDR) implemented by Indigenous scholars which can inform decisions surrounding future Indigenous academic mobility across the globe.

Academic Mobility

Mobility has become a requisite of academic employment. Higher education institutions have seized on a desire to ‘internationalise’ operations. This occurs most visibly through the recruitment of international students whose full fee-paying positions conjure the trope of ‘cash

cows' milked by an exploitative system (Robertson 2011). Indeed, the Australian university sector's dire financial position in the face of international border closures is testament to this. There is also an institutional push to be internationally competitive in research production (Komotar 2019) which has historically required frequent domestic and international travel for conferences and network building activities. Additionally, academic staff are often faced with the prospect of geographical, cultural, familial, and linguistic relocations in the pursuit of tenure (or tenure-track) appointments (McAlpine 2012). The shared precarity and discomfort that the current climate of higher education presents for academics does not go unrecognised (Thomas et al 2020).

Much of the research into academic mobility focuses on non-Indigenous groups. This reflects the demographics of academia generally. As Holmes acknowledges, the discussion in relation to academic mobility generally covers those from privileged backgrounds (Holmes 2014) who tend to be well-represented in higher education and academic appointments. Research suggests that Indigenous peoples are generally under-represented in the higher education workforce, particularly in senior leadership positions (Trudgett & Page 2020; Universities Australia 2020). While Indigenous experiences of academic mobility present unique challenges for individuals and communities, there remains a gap in research attending to Indigenous academics' experience of mobility in Australia and globally.

While Indigenous Studies as a discipline traditionally focussed on Indigenous peoples and communities from the land on which the institution operates, recent scholarship has seen a dramatic shift to a global focus on Indigenous, Māori, and First Nations academic research (Carlson & Berglund 2021; Rogers 2017; Laws 2016). Indigenous academics travel widely across nation-state borders for research collaborations and academic appointments, particularly

within Canada, the United States, Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. The outcomes of these collaborations are many and varied and contribute to a fast-growing awareness of political action and resistance among an increasingly global Indigenous community. However, as Morley (et al) point out:

“While there are many gains including transcultural learning, enhanced employability and inter-cultural competencies, there are also less-romantic aspects to mobility including ‘otherness’, affective considerations such as isolation, and epistemic exclusions...” (Morley et al 2018, p. 538).

For Indigenous peoples these are the manifold challenges of leaving Country and community and working as a guest on other Indigenous peoples’ unceded sovereign lands. As Morley et al (2018) point out, transnational academic mobility can evoke feelings of detachment from national and community identification as well as recall archaic tropes of “perceived nomadism and de-territorialisation” (2018, p. 544) which have often been deployed in colonial nation-states to disenfranchise Indigenous peoples. Despite, and perhaps because of, these pitfalls of academic mobility for Indigenous peoples, digital communication technology is being deployed to remain resilient, build communities, and establish innovative and productive connections.

Indigenous Relations to Country at Home and Abroad

Country is central to Indigenous ontology. Cultural, social, and spiritual existence is closely tied to Indigenous peoples’ home Country. As Suchet-Pearson et al rightly point out, “human and more-than-human beings never *are* – not isolated, not static, not known – but only *become* as they constantly emerge together” (2013, p. 188 [emphasis in original]). As a relational ontology, Indigenous perspectives on existence and identity rely closely on relationships

between land, country, and living and non-living beings. These relationships are dependent upon the cultural diversity of the many individual nations which make up the Indigenous Australian continent. The Western notion of Australian nationhood, state borders and national identity is incongruent with Indigenous national heterogeneity. More than 250 individual Indigenous nations exist on this continent. And, as we travel interstate, we encounter the unceded sovereign lands of other Indigenous peoples. The expectation, underpinned by Imperialist notions of the Commonwealth, that we are ‘one’ though we are ‘many’ undermines the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples of Australia and presents Indigenous academics who travel for work with unique challenges.

Higher education institutions are fraught with challenges regarding Indigenous nationhood and identity. Often, Indigenous academics are mistakenly viewed as student support and cultural diversity officers rather than engaged and productive scholars. As Indigenous academics travel across nation state borders (within and outside of the current Australian state) they are asked to provide generic cultural advice as if Indigenous communities easily fit within a singular identity. The result for many Indigenous peoples is a need to continually reevaluate, perform and restate their identity and respond to challenges to their authenticity. Recent innovations in the use of digital technology by Indigenous academics address these challenges.

Indigenous Digital Solidarity

The trope of Indigenous technological naivety has been a pervasive colonial tactic in Australia and the world. The phrase “they didn’t even have tractors”, overheard while on a personal vacation to the United Kingdom in 2005, typifies colonial discourse deployed to both justify dispossession through the falsehood of Terra Nullius as well as the continued subjugation of Indigenous peoples because they were thought to be so uncivilised and technologically inept.

Recent research has shown however, that Indigenous peoples utilise digital technology (social media in particular) at rates higher than non-Indigenous peoples (Carlson and Frazer 2018). A recent study by the author found that Indigenous peoples routinely establish innovative avenues for the dissemination of Indigenous voices via social media. In 2019, the Indigenous peoples Rise Up symposium at Northern Arizona University (Carlson and Berglund 2021), found that Indigenous peoples are using social media to facilitate global solidarity and political activism via movements such as #NoDAPL (resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline), #MMIW (raising awareness of extreme rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women), and #IdleNoMore (a movement linking Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the interest of the protection of land, water and sky as well as Indigenous sovereignty). Indigenous peoples' innovations with digital technology are also creating global networks of teachers and academics.

As the social impacts of coronavirus became apparent in March 2020, my circumstances meant that it was most sensible to remain at home, 1,400 kilometres away from my university office. The first two weeks were spent in quarantine in a farm shed an hour and a half south of my usual residence. Collecting firewood and rainwater and running my computer and smart phone on a small solar-powered battery, it was distant, and for a time, I felt the gravity of this distance. But my productivity appeared to increase. With colleagues, I commenced discussions about innovative ways to embrace these unfamiliar circumstances. Core to these early discussions was a recognition that Indigenous academics and HDR students were at considerable risk of isolation and disconnection. We went to work, drawing on existing strong networks of Indigenous academics and community members, to make the most of an unusual situation and to support our students, colleagues, friends, and community members. What followed was an encouraging line up of guest lecturers, international writing workshops, and digitally facilitated field work. The networks of Indigenous academics and students grew with speed and energy.

Opportunities arose through collaborative networks such as the Forum for Indigenous Research Excellence (FIRE). Started by Professor Bronwyn Carlson at the University of Wollongong in 2013, FIRE is a network of Indigenous researchers and allies from across the globe. In 2020, the collaborative and innovative talents of its members culminated in two key examples of digital mobility and the facilitation of continued support for established and future Indigenous academics. These projects demonstrated the efficacy of the global community of Indigenous academics, HDR candidates, and allies and their desire to maintain strength and resilience in the face of uncertain times. The members of FIRE, laptops and tablets at the ready, were clearly prepared for the sudden changes presented by heightened social restrictions.

In June 2020, members of FIRE designed and delivered an online writing workshop. The original expectation was that approximately fifteen Indigenous Australian and Native American HDR students from Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona and Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia would attend and build a small HDR network with a focus on writing skills. Surprisingly, through the reach of this network, more than fifty participants attended via video conference from across seven states in the US and various Indigenous nations across Australia, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand, and Norway. The registration and participation in this small informal writing workshop demonstrated a reach and connectivity amongst Indigenous academics and students far beyond the expectations of the workshop organisers. It also demonstrated the desire and enthusiasm Indigenous HDR students and academics maintain for embracing digital communication technology to build strong networks and establish political solidarity.

In the second half of 2020, the Department of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University hosted a number of Indigenous FIRE members from Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria

and Tasmania in Australia, Saskatchewan in Canada, and Aotearoa New Zealand who logged on to digital classrooms to present weekly guest lectures. The generosity of these world-leading experts in Indigenous Studies was overwhelming. For both undergraduate and postgraduate Indigenous Studies students, the opportunity to hear from so many experts from diverse academic backgrounds in one semester is rare. The contributions of these scholars clearly respond to Nakata's position that Indigenous researchers, first and foremost, have a responsibility to remain aware of community concerns and sensibilities (2006) in their work. The enthusiasm with which established Indigenous and First Nations academics offered their time to support future generations was not unexpected nor unprecedented, though it was unusual in comparison to mainstream academia.

This collaboration, mentorship, and support of future generations is an Indigenous value and reflects a recognition of the past and ongoing challenges faced by Indigenous people as they enter higher education. The restrictions we faced in 2020 necessitated a transition to digital academic community engagement and support for Indigenous HDR candidates. These events illustrate firstly, that disintermediated and deterritorialised digital communication technology affords valuable and meaningful engagement with an Indigenous HDR network. Secondly, the peculiarities of this year have demonstrated the efficacy of digital communication technology to facilitate Indigenous academic *digital* mobility.

The future of Indigenous academic mobility

Academic mobility, particularly the kind that results in established collaborative networks and research partnerships, can clearly have positive impacts on scholarship and research output. According to Morley et al, "academic mobility can mean that new knowledge is produced, emergent knowledge is exchanged, disseminated and validated, and knowledge networks and

collaborations are formed” (2018, p. 542). However, it is essential that we consider the lessons learned in 2020 regarding strategies that can foster such positive outcomes in what is to become a much more complex and digitally centred academic world. There is still the need, and perhaps a desire, to physically traverse geographical boundaries for face-to-face and on Country collaboration. Indigenous cultural protocols require research and relationship building to centre “the relational dynamic between self, others, and nature” (Kovach 2010, p. 42). But the conversation need not be confined to this space. Seeds can be sown in person, but research collaborations and HDR candidatures can prosper through expert deployment of digital communication technology.

The future of digital communication technology is exciting, particularly for Indigenous HDRs. As Brabazon has outlined in detail, the ‘digital doctorate’ (2017) has immense potential to transform HDR candidature. The digital doctorate responds to the increasingly inaccessible and administration focussed neoliberal higher education system through opening up “the innovative spaces that are available to supervisors and our institutions” (2017, p. 90). Brabazon is talking about social media. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Zoom and Skype, all offer possibilities for innovation in HDR candidatures. The current coronavirus restrictions and the response by Indigenous global networks such as FIRE have demonstrated this. Current and future Indigenous academics have no problem embracing emerging digital communication technologies for social and political means. There is no reason why we can’t embrace it to continue to build our presence in academia.

Conclusion

The precarity of academic employment is being felt more than ever. Fear of job losses, casualisation of academic labour, and requirements to travel away from home for employment

precipitates negativity in the academic workforce. Institutions appear to be foregrounding the fiscal bottom line over the quality of education, degrees, and research output – at the same time pressing academic staff to increase productivity. It is difficult to foresee higher education institutions deviating from the current path toward “post-expertise knowledge factories” (Brabazon 2017, p. 89). Indeed, recent examples of work-from-home success in response to coronavirus restrictions could see future divestment in capital assets and infrastructure pushing academic staff toward increased off campus digital mobility. But as 2020 has shown, digital communication technology can be used to great effect in strengthening foundational academic pursuits of research and teaching excellence. Indigenous academics and communities are not alone in deploying digital communication technologies to establish innovative approaches to academic mobility. Though in many ways, and in the face of a global pandemic, they have taken the lead.

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