

Low expectations: Are universities failing Aboriginal academics?

‘Aboriginal people have been historically disadvantaged in education and employment, and closing the tertiary education and employment gap is a laudable goal.

‘Australian universities have adopted diversity and inclusion policies that include commitments to employ and promote a percentage of academics who are (to name just a few groups) women, Aboriginal, or from non-English speaking backgrounds.

‘Appointing Aboriginal staff appears to be a particular preoccupation.

This report explores the academic track records of senior Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars at public Australian universities.

‘Are senior Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars judged by equivalent standards?

‘The conclusion is that when it comes to appointing senior academics, universities seem to be applying lower standards to Aboriginal scholars than to non-Aboriginal scholars.

‘A total of 118 senior Aboriginal academics were identified across 37 universities.

‘Aboriginal academics had less than half the number of publications as non-Aboriginal academics.

‘Aboriginal professors were appointed in around half the time it took an equivalent non-Aboriginal professor.

‘Do universities wish to create divisions between staff because of perceptions of inequitable race-based treatment?

‘Do they seek to erode public confidence that the government funding given to universities is being used to appoint the most appropriately qualified individuals?

‘These findings suggest that diversity and inclusion targets that emphasise the appointment and promotion of Aboriginal academics may be influencing employment decisions and creating a culture of low expectations.’

All words attributable to Dr Samara McPhedran, Research Fellow Close the Gap Research