Beyond metrics: Centring Indigenous Knowledges in higher education equity evaluation

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Evaluation in Australian higher education is often presented as objective and neutral, yet dominant frameworks remain deeply embedded in Eurocentric epistemologies that privilege compliance, standardisation, and quantifiable metrics. These approaches marginalise Indigenous knowledges and risk reducing equity to a technical rather than structural and justice-oriented concern. In this article, we critically examine how such frameworks entrench epistemic exclusion in the evaluation of equity programs. Drawing on Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies, including fa'afaletui, vā, talanoa, and tok stori, we argue for relational, culturally grounded, and community-led approaches to evaluation. Case studies from the University of Technology Sydney, Western Sydney University, and Griffith University demonstrate how Indigenous-Pacific methodologies are embedded in program design, delivery, and evaluation, generating indicators such as cultural identity, belonging, and intergenerational aspiration that remain invisible in mainstream evaluation logics. We show how Indigenous-Pacific frameworks not only expand what counts as rigour but also reposition evaluation as a practice of reciprocity, accountability, and justice. Our contribution is both critical and hopeful and a call to reimagine evaluation not as a tool of control, but as a relational and transformative practice that honours Indigenous sovereignty and community-defined success.

Keywords: Indigenous epistemologies; Pacific epistemologies; higher education equity; educational evaluation; decolonising evaluation; Talanoa; Fa'afaletui; relational accountability

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Introduction

Evaluation practice in higher education is frequently framed as neutral and objective, tied to measures of performance and accountability such as reporting, targets, and benchmarking (Smith et al. 2018; Parker et al. 2024). Yet dominant frameworks are embedded in Western epistemologies that privilege quantifiable metrics, standardisation, and compliance, often at the expense of relational, cultural, and community-centred conceptions of success (Biesta 2007; SenGupta et al. 2004). As Biesta (2007) cautions, the "what works" approach risks reducing complex educational and ethical questions to technical decisions that obscure the broader social purposes of education. Indigenous evaluation scholars similarly argue that evaluation must be decolonised, as claims of neutrality have long marginalised Indigenous values and ways of knowing (Kawakami et al. 2007; Cram 2016).

A central limitation of these dominant approaches lies in values they normalise and reproduce. Evaluation is never value-free, yet the values embedded within Western frameworks often remain unexamined. As Burke and Lumb (2018) argue, equity evaluation requires critical attention to whose values determine what is counted as evidence and what is deemed worthy of measurement. Following Guba and Lincoln's (1989) foundational critique of fourth-generation evaluation, they highlight how traditional frameworks reproduce dominant power relations by privileging norms grounded in whiteness, individualism, and institutional authority. Lumb and Burke (2019) further show how these value commitments shape the discursive boundaries of equity itself, constraining what is thinkable or measurable. When applied uncritically, such evaluative logics reinscribe deficit framings that position equity-group students as needing to catch up to predetermined norms rather than recognising diverse forms of knowledge, capability, and success.

These critiques have direct implications in the Australian higher education equity landscape, where evaluation frameworks such as SEHEEF (Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework) are closely aligned with governmental accountability agendas. Although these frameworks seek systematic improvement, they remain situated within epistemological and axiological orientations that privilege compliance, quantification, and individualised outcomes over relational accountability, community-defined success, and Indigenous sovereignty (Walter & Andersen 2013; Gordon et al. 2021). Taken together, this body of literature reveals that dominant evaluation regimes risk entrenching epistemic exclusions and reproducing inequities even as they claim to advance equity.

In this article, we critically examine how such frameworks operate in Australian higher education equity programs and propose culturally grounded alternatives rooted in Indigenous worldviews and values. We argue for an expanded understanding of rigour that encompasses cultural responsiveness, ethical relevance, and context-specific validity (Biesta 2007; SenGupta et al. 2004; Smith 2012; Katz et al. 2016). While grounded in Indigenous-Pacific paradigms, these approaches generate insights with relevance far beyond their cultural origins, contributing to wider debates about knowledge production, evaluation, and practice in diverse educational and societal settings (Vaioleti 2006; Sanga & Reynolds 2017).

As Pacific authors, we represent multiple Pacific heritages and migration histories. We write from the positionality of educators, researchers, equity practitioners, and women working within Australian higher education institutions. Our work in student equity and community engagement is inseparable from our cultural responsibilities to families, communities, and ancestors. We offer these insights for all stakeholders engaged in equity work in higher education. We also

acknowledge that we operate within a system that marginalises Indigenous knowledge and frames equity work through deficit-informed logics. We have witnessed, and at times been required to work within, frameworks that prioritise institutional metrics over community-defined success, silencing the relational and cultural dimensions of learning that matter to Indigenous peoples. Our critique is not detached or external. It emerges from our proximity to the very programs we design, deliver, and evaluate. We are situated within the tensions of navigating accountability to both our institutions and our communities. As such, we do not claim neutrality. Instead, we assert a standpoint deliberately grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, which frames evaluation as a relational and ethical practice rather than a technical exercise. These Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies build on the work of prominent academics over the past two decades (Vaioleti 2006; Anae et al. 2010; Pulotu-Endemann 2001; Sanga & Reynolds 2019; Smith 2013).

Our engagement with Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies is not symbolic; it reflects our ontological grounding and our responsibility to uphold cultural authenticity in all aspects of our work. We bring to this work our cultural protocols and a collective commitment to reimagining evaluation of higher education equity programs as a practice accountable to the learners and communities we serve. This commitment compels us to question not only how evaluation is done, but whose knowledge counts, whose voices are legitimised, and what is considered valid evidence of impact. We contend that evaluation must move beyond extractive approaches that impose external definitions of success and instead embrace culturally grounded paradigms that privilege community agency, relational accountability, and collective wellbeing. In naming our positionality, we also acknowledge the diversity within our collective.

We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and are committed to nurturing our relationships with respect and integrity, acknowledging that we all work on unceded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land. We honour this complexity and the relational responsibilities it entails. It is important to note here, that while we write from within the Australian Higher Education context, we acknowledge that this is and will always be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land. Any effort to reimagine evaluation in higher education must begin with privileging the voices, knowledge systems, and sovereignty of Australia's First Peoples. At the same time, as Sāmoan and Cook Island-Niuean educators, we also see value in offering insights from our own cultural traditions. In this article, we introduce three Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies, Fa'afaletui, Vā, and Talanoa/Tok Stori, not as substitutes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, but as examples of what becomes possible when evaluation is grounded in relational, collective, and culturally embedded philosophies. These epistemologies highlight alternative ways of knowing and being that can complement and extend equity evaluation in Australian higher education, affirming that diverse Indigenous traditions have much to teach about accountability, belonging, and justice. By grounding evaluation in these Indigenous knowledge systems, we invite a shift from extractive, metrics-driven models to approaches that are relational, ethical, and culturally responsive.

The collaborative process of writing this paper across institutional contexts, and from the diverse positions we bring, is itself a demonstration of Indigenous relational knowledge-making practices grounded in reciprocity and collective responsibility. In this way, our work challenges dominant evaluation frameworks while also enacting relational, culturally grounded knowledge-making in

the very way we write, think and do together. We offer this both as critique and contribution, grounded in our hope for a higher education system that recognises the sovereignty of Indigenous knowledge systems and makes space for equity work to be done with care and cultural resonance.

Dominant equity evaluation frameworks in Australian higher education

Over the past decade, Australian higher education has developed a series of frameworks designed to strengthen the evaluation of equity initiatives. These include the Critical Interventions Framework (CIF), the Equity Performance Framework, and the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF), as well as more recent institution-led models. While they have advanced accountability and evidence bases, they remain anchored in technocratic logics that privilege quantification and compliance over relational and community-defined measures of success.

The Critical Interventions Framework (CIF) introduced by Naylor, Baik, and James (2013) was the first attempt to systematise the evaluation of equity initiatives. It proposed a typology of interventions across the student life-cycle, Pre-access, access, participation, and attainment, and emphasised the need for evaluation given what it described as a paucity of evidence. While influential in creating a shared language, CIF framed equity largely through government-defined categories such as low socioeconomic status, regional and remote, disability, non-English speaking background, women in non-traditional fields, and Indigenous students. Its indicators focused on access, participation, retention, and completion, thereby reducing equity to measurable institutional outcomes rather than exploring systemic drivers of exclusion. CIF Part 2 (Bennett et al. 2015) sought to strengthen the evidence base through a large-scale review of publications, survey data, and interviews. It identified initiatives demonstrating impact and emphasised features such as curriculum-embedded support, mentoring, and collaboration with schools and communities. The report concluded that the equity evidence base remained underdeveloped, particularly in relation to completion and graduate outcomes. While Indigenous students were recognised as having lower success and retention rates than their peers, this was largely presented as an outcome disparity with limited interrogation of structural inequities or colonial legacies embedded in higher education institutions. CIF Part 3 extends this lineage by updating the Equity Initiatives Framework to version 2.0 and synthesising recent impact studies across the student life cycle, including pre-access, access, participation, and attainment (Bennett et al. 2024). However, the report itself acknowledges that reliance on published impact studies and documented evaluations offers only a partial and incomplete picture of equity practice across the sector, as many effective initiatives remain undocumented or are constrained by publication conventions that narrow methodological and contextual detail. This limitation underscores how dominant evaluation regimes continue to privilege what is measurable and comparable over what is relational, contextual, and culturally meaningful.

The Equity Performance Framework (Pitman & Koshy 2015) extended the evaluation agenda by consolidating national datasets into performance domains of access, participation, attainment, and graduate outcomes. Its purpose was to strengthen accountability and benchmarking at the system level. Although it acknowledged the importance of belonging and student experience, its indicators were drawn almost exclusively from quantitative national surveys and statistics. This reliance on numbers, while useful for comparability, left limited room to capture the relational, cultural, and community dimensions of equity, echoing what Walter and Andersen (2013) critique as the

fetishisation of statistics detached from Indigenous sovereignty and context. These limitations highlight how dominant frameworks struggle to recognise relational and cultural forms of success, reinforcing what Lumb and Burke (2018) identify as deeper questions about whose values shape what counts as evidence in equity work.

The Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF), released in 2021 with a detailed guidance manual, embedded program logic and continuous quality improvement into the equity evaluation process. It distinguished between routine monitoring and more advanced impact evaluations, drawing on both quantitative and theory-based approaches. The framework has since influenced national reporting and the Universities Accord, where it is presented as a robust tool for accountability (Robinson et al. 2025). However, critiques raised during sector consultations point to its privileging of quasi-experimental designs, burdensome reporting requirements, and limited ability to capture intangible outcomes such as belonging. While SEHEEF allows for qualitative data it does not mandate relational or identity-based indicators meaning the kinds of reflections that emerge in programs such as shifts in students' cultural identity, sense of belonging, service or contributions to community are not formally recognised or required. This omission keeps evaluations centred on programs rather than on holistic development, reinforcing the very gap our work seeks to address. This absence of relational and identity-based indicators aligns with Smith et al (2018), who argue that evaluation in Indigenous higher education has long been marginalised and conflated with performance monitoring rather than designed to reflect Indigenous standpoints.

More recent institutional frameworks have attempted to redress these gaps. Zacharias et al. (2024) developed a student-centred evaluation framework at Swinburne University using human-centred design and Indigenous governance structures. This approach broadened indicators of success to include prosperity, wellbeing, cultural safety, and psychosocial support, and acknowledged that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, success is defined collectively through contributions to family and community. While this represents progress towards culturally grounded evaluation, these Indigenous insights were still mediated through program logic categories, reproducing linear and Western causal assumptions. As Nakata (2007) argues, frameworks that translate Indigenous experience into existing disciplinary structures risk reinscribing deficit positions rather than transforming the epistemic terms of evaluation.

These frameworks demonstrate Australia's growing capacity for systematic equity evaluation, yet they remain grounded in Western epistemologies, program logic, and policy categories that treat equity as a technical problem of effectiveness rather than a structural question of justice (Robinson et al. 2025; Burke & Lumb 2018). This risks entrenching compliance cultures while obscuring the colonial foundations of higher education and the conditions they create for students. A shift is needed towards approaches that privilege Indigenous standpoints and render evaluation culturally grounded and transformative, drawing on methodologies centred on sovereignty, resistance and relational accountability (Rigney 1999; Smith et al. 2018; Smith 2012). Walter and Andersen (2013) remind us that even quantitative approaches can be reconfigured through Indigenous sovereignty, reframing data practices around Indigenous epistemologies rather than institutional demands. Pacific approaches such as fa'afaletui, vā, talanoa and tok stori further unsettle Western evaluation logics by positioning relationality,

reciprocity and collective meaning-making as legitimate forms of evidence. Together, these approaches reorient evaluation from a compliance exercise to a practice of justice, belonging and care, affirming communities as knowledge holders rather than data sources.

Despite their increasing sophistication, dominant equity frameworks reveal both the progress and the persistent limitations of equity evaluation in Australian higher education. They have strengthened accountability and provided shared languages of evidence, yet they remain shaped by axiological assumptions that privilege measurement, linearity and institutional priorities over relational, cultural and community-defined understandings of success. As Burke and Lumb (2018) caution, such assumptions delimit what is recognised as valuable, reducing the space for alternative ways of knowing and evaluating. Moving beyond these constraints requires approaches that centre sovereignty, relationality and collective wellbeing. Pacific and Indigenous knowledges offer precisely this possibility, opening pathways to reimagine evaluation on different epistemic terms and grounding it in the values, aspirations and authority of the communities it seeks to serve.

Indigenous-Pacific knowledges

In response to the limitations outlined above, Indigenous knowledge systems offer evaluation paradigms grounded in relationality, sovereignty and collective wellbeing. This orientation aligns with what Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (2012) describe as Indigenous critical praxis, in which communities enact epistemological authority through sustained collective reflection, dialogue, and action grounded in their own cultural, historical, and relational contexts. These approaches emerge from worldviews in which knowledge is inseparable from relationships to people, place and the spiritual, and where accountability is exercised through reciprocity rather than institutional authority. Indigenous scholars continue to reclaim and restore methodologies that honour collective responsibility, ethical interdependence and cultural integrity (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo 2002; LaFrance & Nichols 2010; Goodwin, Sauni & Were 2015). Across education, health and the social sciences, this resurgence challenges extractive and metrics-driven logics and reasserts Indigenous intellectual traditions as authoritative sites of theory and method. Rather than being positioned as cultural additions to existing systems, these traditions provide essential paradigms through which Indigenous-Pacific knowledges can be engaged as epistemic frameworks that fundamentally reshape what counts as evidence, value and educational success.

Indigenous epistemologies do not simply extend or supplement Western evaluation models. They reorient evaluation itself by redefining its purposes, processes and ethical commitments. Whereas dominant frameworks prioritise standardisation, linearity and institutional control, Pacific-Indigenous traditions foreground reciprocity, collective accountability and relational ethics as the basis of credible inquiry. This shift reflects a different ontology of knowledge, one in which relationships are not contextual factors but the grounds upon which knowledge becomes valid. Rigour is therefore understood not through control or neutrality, but through cultural integrity, responsiveness and the extent to which evaluation nurtures belonging, responsibility and justice. Justice here concerns the restoration of fairness, dignity and balance in evaluative practice, achieved by recognising whose knowledge has historically been marginalised and ensuring communities participate and are represented on their own terms. Viewed in this way, evaluation becomes a practice of relational care rather than a mechanism of surveillance or compliance.

Despite this, Indigenous knowledges are often relegated to the periphery, treated as cultural embellishments rather than legitimate epistemological foundations. This marginalisation sustains the dominance of evaluation regimes that continue to define communities as subjects of intervention rather than partners in knowledge-making (Suaalii-Sauni 2014). Within these dynamics, institutions retain authority over determining what constitutes a problem, how success is measured and who has the power to judge impact (Smith 2012; Rigney 1999). Such arrangements entrench hierarchical power relations in which communities are positioned as recipients of evaluation rather than co-creators of change. Relational approaches counter this by locating evaluators within a web of responsibilities to people and place, requiring evaluation to be accountable to the communities whose lives it aims to understand (Cram 2021).

Indigenous epistemologies also invite a re-examination of what counts as rigour. As Lather (2007) argues, rigour is always entangled with the epistemological commitments that underpin method. Indigenous and Pacific approaches extend this insight by grounding rigour in ethical responsibility, reciprocity and accountability to community-defined aspirations. Rigour is not demonstrated through control or distance, but through the evaluator's capacity to uphold relationships, protect cultural integrity and contribute to collective flourishing. This framing positions rigour, epistemology and educational justice as inseparable. Epistemologies establish what counts as knowledge, rigour ensures these commitments are enacted with integrity, and justice provides the horizon against which their value is judged. Together, these dimensions create the foundation for an evaluation practice that is not only methodologically sound but also ethically and politically accountable.

Although this article focuses on three core Pacific epistemologies, these exist within a wider constellation of values and principles that sustain culturally grounded practice. Concepts such as, but not limited to, tautua (service), lotogatasi (shared voice), tauhi vā (relational maintenance) and tapu (spiritual integrity) deepen the moral and relational dimensions of evaluation. These practices do not operate as isolated cultural expressions. Instead, they function as ethical frameworks that guide how knowledge is created, how relationships are honoured and how value is determined. Together, they expand the field of evaluation to recognise diverse ways of knowing and to centre justice-oriented educational outcomes that affirm, uphold and elevate the communities to whom evaluation is accountable.

Fa'afaletui - weaving perspectives into collective understanding.

Fa'afaletui is a Samoan paradigm that reflects the relational and collective ethos of fa'asamoa, where knowledge is not individually held but co-constructed. It weaves together diverse perspectives, from genealogies (gafa), proverbs (alagā'upu), and oral histories, into a collective account of truth. In evaluation, fa'afaletui requires researchers and practitioners to consult broadly, build consensus, and remain accountable to community protocols. Integrity is demonstrated through early engagement, culturally appropriate processes (such as ava ceremonies), and group-based dialogue that values talanoa and collaborative problem-solving (Suaalii-Sauni et al. 2014; Tamasese & Parsons 2014).

Importantly, fa'afaletui unsettles Western paradigms that prioritise linear causality, individual expertise, and efficiency. It demands time, trust, and sensitivity to hierarchical, generational, and gendered dynamics that shape participation. These requirements sit uneasily within academic systems built on speed and measurable outputs, yet they yield outcomes that are richer, more ethical, and culturally embedded. Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Efi (2010) describes fa'afaletui metaphorically

through the perspectives of those in the canoe (closest to the issue), those in the treetop (with a broader vantage), and those on the mountain (with strategic oversight). It is only through weaving these perspectives together that a fuller truth emerges. In evaluation, this paradigm ensures that findings are interpreted through cultural worldviews, outcomes are defined by communities themselves, and accountability is maintained to cultural values rather than institutional metrics.

Vā - sacred relational space and ethical accountability

Across Pacific societies, vā is one of the most profound philosophical concepts. Often translated simply as "space," vā refers to the sacred, dynamic relational space that binds people, communities, generations, and even the spiritual and ecological worlds. In Samoan thought, e teu le vā calls for cherishing and maintaining this relational space, while in Tongan traditions, tauhi vā reflects the duty of care for social and spatial ties (Anae et al. 2010; Ka'ili 2005, 2017). Existence itself is understood as relational, one's being is constituted through connections, not individual autonomy. The tā-vā theory of reality exposes how Western frameworks separate time from space, reducing evaluation to linear progression and short-term outcomes rather than recognising relational continuity and long-term collective responsibility. Within this framing, tauhi vā is understood as a sustained relational practice through which harmony and balance are cultivated over time (Ka'ili & Māhina 2017). This philosophy directly challenges Western epistemologies that privilege individualism, neutrality, and objectivity. In evaluation, dominant models ask, "What works? What outcomes were achieved?" A vā-based approach instead requires evaluators to ask: "How are relationships being tended? Is respect upheld? Are processes maintaining trust and balance? Do outcomes nurture the collective as well as the individual?" Here, rigour is measured by the strength and integrity of relationships sustained throughout the process, not the precision of statistical indicators.

In practice, this requires long-term presence, humility, and attentiveness to relational obligations that extend beyond discrete project phases. (Futter-Puati & Maua-Hodges 2019). Evaluators become caretakers of relationships as much as assessors of outcomes. Importantly, vā does not dismiss established evaluation concerns such as validity or reliability but reframes them through relational logics. When embedded in higher education, vā extends impact measures beyond retention and progression to include whether programs nurture belonging, affirm cultural identity, and sustain reciprocal commitments between universities and communities. It reframes evaluation from transactional accountability to relational accountability, where success is judged by the quality of care maintained across relationships.

Talanoa/Tok Stori - Dialogue, trust and cultural truth telling

Talanoa and Tok Stori are dialogic traditions that foreground storytelling, trust, and communal reflection as rigourous forms of knowledge-making. Emerging from Polynesia (talanoa in Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji) and Melanesia (tok stori in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands), both approaches prioritise reciprocity, patience, and relational ethics in the co-creation of knowledge.
Talanoa is often translated as "talk," but within Pacific contexts it means much more. It is an open, heartfelt process of dialogue that creates culturally safe spaces for sharing experiences, aspirations, and stories. As Vaioleti (2006) notes, it positions the evaluator not as a distant observer but as a co-learner, building meaning through empathetic connection. Tok stori, deeply rooted in Melanesian village life and the wantok system of kinship and responsibility, generates knowledge

through inclusive conversation and consensus (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo 2002). Such dialogic practices exemplify Indigenous critical praxis, where collective dialogue becomes a site of critique, decision-making, and social transformation (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo 2012). Both traditions resist efficiency-driven imperatives, privileging time, patience, and trust over speed or extractive data collection.

In evaluation, these approaches affirm oral knowledge systems and cultural sovereignty, generating evidence of belonging, identity, wellbeing, and resilience often invisible in surveys or administrative datasets. They challenge evaluators to adopt humility, reflexivity, and accountability to the community. In higher education, talanoa and tok stori create dialogic spaces where Pacific students, families, and communities' articulate success on their own terms. They are not interchangeable techniques that can be slotted into program logic; they require structural shifts in evaluation, from transactional to relational, from outcome-focused to process-conscious, from institutional to community accountability.

Together, fa'afaletui, vā, talanoa, and tok stori reposition evaluation from an extractive exercise to a practice of reciprocity and justice. They generate forms of evidence, identity, belonging, intergenerational aspiration, and collective wellbeing, that remain invisible within Western frameworks such as SEHEEF. By centring Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies, evaluation is redefined not as an act of compliance but as a practice of cultural accountability and relational care. In doing so, they demand structural change in higher education: recognition of cultural authority, community-defined outcomes, and the redefinition of rigour itself.

Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies conceptualise evaluation as iterative, relational, and co-constructed (Goodwin, Sauni & Were 2015). The Fala Methodology (Fainga'a-Manu Sione 2023) exemplifies this cultural alignment, positioning researchers and evaluators within a sacred, layered relational space where knowledge is co-woven. Vā foregrounds the sacred relational space that binds people and obliges evaluators to nurture it with care, reciprocity, and respect. Talanoa and Tok Stori re-centre storytelling, dialogue, and communal knowledge as valid and rigorous forms of evaluation. Together, these approaches affirm that "cultural fit" (Goodwin, Sauni, & Were 2015) is not peripheral but central to what counts. Fa'afaletui weaves diverse perspectives into collective truth-making, honouring genealogies, oral histories, and shared decision-making.

Reframing evaluation - insights from Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies

UTS Pasifika Programs

At the University of Technology Sydney, Pasifika Programs demonstrate how Indigenous and Pacific epistemologies can transform evaluation into an iterative, relational, and community-accountable practice. What began in the early 2020s as school-based mentoring has evolved into a multi-strand initiative spanning mentoring, leadership development, pathway programs, and professional engagement. Across these activities, evaluation is intentionally grounded in Pacific worldviews, privileging collective meaning-making, cultural identity, and strengthened vā as core indicators of success.

The Pasifika Mentoring Program was built on collective, strengths-based practice, and this shaped its evaluative focus on identity, belonging, and leadership. As Pacific student mentors worked in schools across Sydney, the program identified cultural identity, wayfinding, leadership capability, and representation through Pacific role-modelling as central markers of success. For many students, seeing Pasifika Student Ambassadors functioned as a powerful form of identity affirmation. This was captured through talanoa, structured self-reflection prompts, and mentor observations that traced shifts in students' sense of belonging and their belief that university was a place where Pacific people thrive. These indicators fall outside conventional evaluation frameworks, yet they reflect the outcomes most valued by Pacific students, families, and communities.

The On-Campus Experience Days provide a key site where the Pasifika Program enacts culturally responsive evaluation. Western tools, including pre and post engagement surveys, track changes in confidence, belonging, and clarity about educational pathways. These sit alongside Pacific-led approaches that privilege voice, relationality, and collective meaning-making. Talanoa circles with Pasifika Student Ambassadors produce deep insight into cultural pride, aspiration, relational confidence, and students' reflections on respect, service, and leadership as foundational values. Culturally attuned observation rubrics capture indicators grounded in vā, including how students show respect during group interactions, how they step into acts of service during activities, and how emerging leadership behaviours surface throughout the day. Communal practices, such as shared meals and informal conversations with ambassadors, offer further evaluative moments in which students articulate a sense of belonging and begin to see themselves reflected in university spaces. Evaluation also demonstrated that participation strengthened the Pasifika Ambassadors themselves. Talanoa revealed that mentoring and facilitation deepened their cultural identity, sense of belonging at UTS, and commitment to service. Ambassadors consistently noted increased confidence, responsibility to community, and visible growth in leadership capability. This mentor-focused insight formed a critical evaluative layer, highlighting that program impact was reciprocal, shaping both mentees and mentors through relational, cultural, and intergenerational growth. These culturally grounded indicators provide a more holistic account of success than conventional attendance, compliance, or output-based measures.

By 2023, the program extended into the professional domain through the UTS and Pacific Professionals Network: Pasifika Professional Mentoring Program, a pilot pairing university students with Pasifika industry mentors. Evaluation continued this blended approach, combining reflective surveys with talanoa-based assessment centred on story, relationship, and cultural obligation. Students described seeing someone like themselves in professional spaces as transformative, naming representation as a core driver of aspiration, confidence, and future orientation. Mentors framed their involvement as 'building our village', positioning mentoring as tautua (service) and intergenerational responsibility. These insights show how evaluation grounded in vā and talanoa produces rigorous, culturally anchored evidence of impact that sits alongside employability measures and graduate capability frameworks without being overshadowed by them.

Across all program areas at UTS, Pacific epistemologies are intentionally embedded as the foundation for evaluation. This is formalised through tools such as the @ Uni Academy - Pasifika Engagement Framework, which outlines indicators including cultural safety, visibility of Pasifika mentors, relationship quality, strengthened vā, parental and community participation, and self-

reported growth in identity and leadership. The evaluation approach integrates surveys, talanoa, reflective journals, and culturally anchored rubrics, with findings feeding directly into program reporting cycles, planning, training, and continuous improvement.

Despite these advances, institutional systems remain dominated by enrolment, retention, and completion metrics. Indigenous-centred indicators such as strengthened vā, cultural identity, community engagement, and intergenerational aspiration struggle to gain formal legitimacy because they fall outside conventional logics of evidence and accountability. This tension underscores both the transformative potential of Indigenous evaluation approaches and the ongoing challenge of embedding their validity within university structures that continue to prioritise quantifiable, individualised outcomes over relational and collective forms of success.

Pasifika Achievement To Higher Education (PATHE)

At Western Sydney University, the Pasifika Achievement To Higher Education (PATHE) program privileges Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies as the foundation for design, delivery, and evaluation. Relational approaches are embedded at every stage, ensuring that impact is both interpreted and acted upon. PATHE identifies indicators such as strengthened cultural identity, intergenerational aspiration-setting, and sustained school–community–university partnerships. Guided by principles including vā fealoaloa'i (respect), tauhi vā (nurturing relationships), and tautua (service), PATHE enacts practices such as talanoa-based career consultations, the Celebrate Pasifika initiative to engage families, and quarterly Teachers Network Meetings, each serving as a site for evaluative insight that is both culturally resonant and educationally meaningful.

Co-designed with teachers and communities, initiatives such as the Leadership Summit and Chase the Dream enable students to nurture aspirations, strengthen cultural pride, and confidently navigate Western education systems. The Australian Universities Pacific Associations Conference (AUPAC) was initiated by PATHE in response to conversations among Pacific university students about wellbeing, belonging, and connection. Designed as a space for cultural affirmation and collective strength, AUPAC has evolved into a national platform where Pacific students connect through sport, culture, and academia. Now student-led and nationally coordinated, it exemplifies evaluation shaped by student voice and community-defined success. PATHE has designed the Leadership and Legacy Profile, a proposed longitudinal evaluation tool intended to trace students' evolving interests, cultural identity, leadership experiences, and aspirations from Year 7 to Year 12. It aims to reframe evaluation as a holistic, strengths-based process. The profile is embedded in the PATHE Teachers' Toolkit, which supports largely non-Pacific teachers to continue engagement, confidently, with Pacific learners. The Toolkit integrates the Profile as a reflective concept informed by teachers' input, offering cultural guidance, practical strategies, and post-workshop activities that uphold tauhi vā (relational care).

In addition, during on-campus senior high school visits, each PATHE module concludes with an informal Talanoa Circle facilitated by PATHE Student Ambassadors. One guiding question is displayed at a time, and student groups share reflections for several minutes before a nominated "talking chief" presents to the wider group. Grounded in vā (relational space), this process privileges collective reflection and emotional resonance over written surveys, generating rich qualitative insights into confidence, belonging, and cultural pride which are dimensions often overlooked by conventional metrics.

Unlike Western evaluation systems centred on standardisation and quantification, PATHE emphasises identity, belonging, and cultural affirmation, dimensions often invisible to dominant metrics yet deeply influential in students' journeys. Evaluation unfolds through communal learning spaces where educators, families, and students share reflections and co-create future directions. One staff member observed that his students' aspirations shifted after watching Pacific university students perform at a cultural day, an experience that affirmed their cultures were visible and valued While such shifts are not recognised in SEHEEF's outcomes, PATHE values them as relational evidence of how cultural visibility influences aspiration and engagement. In this way, PATHE complements conventional metrics by affirming Pacific-Indigenous knowledge systems and expanding success to include identity, service, and social contribution alongside academic achievement.

Pathways in Place & Māori and Pasifika Pathways to Success (MAPPS)

At Griffith University, the Pathways in Place initiative and the Māori and Pasifika Pathways to Success (MAPPS) program embody Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies in both design and evaluation. Fa'afaletui provides a guiding metaphor, weaving together the perspectives of First Nations, Pasifika, refugee, and underserved communities to co-create pathways into higher education. This approach shifts evaluation away from measuring isolated outputs toward a collective account of impact that acknowledges perspectives across community, institution, and policy environments.

Evaluation privileges stories, genealogies, and lived experiences that emerge through fono and talanoa. Instead of reducing student success to retention or completion rates, these dialogic methods surface insights about belonging, cultural identity, and intergenerational responsibility. In doing so, they challenge dominant frameworks that assume linear causality and struggle to capture cultural and relational dimensions of change.

MAPPS extends this ethos through the Fonofale model (2001), which provides a holistic frame for student check-ins across spiritual, cultural, physical, and mental domains, underscoring that academic achievement cannot be separated from wellbeing. Informal practices, such as shared meals, culturally safe drop-in sessions, and communal spaces, are intentionally used as evaluative moments. These encounters enable staff and students to interact on equal footing, fostering trust and openness that formal survey instruments often miss. A notable example is the Samoan language competition hosted at the Logan campus. While presented as a cultural celebration, it also generated rich insights into how language, identity, and pride shape students' aspirations for higher education. Teachers and community judges observed how preparing and presenting in Samoan not only strengthened students' linguistic skills but also affirmed their sense of belonging within the university. This illustrates how cultural practices themselves can function as evaluative processes, producing evidence of impact that is both academically meaningful and culturally resonant.

Together, these practices show how Griffith's initiatives reconfigure evaluation: positioning language, relationships, and holistic wellbeing as legitimate forms of evidence; elevating collective narratives alongside individual outcomes; and embedding reciprocity and accountability into every evaluative exchange. In this way, Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies are not supplementary but transformative, reshaping evaluation from a tool of measurement into a practice of community capacity-building and justice.

Taken together, the three programs demonstrate that culturally grounded evaluation does more than complement existing systems. It reconfigures the epistemic foundations of evaluation by affirming identity, strengthening belonging, and positioning evaluators within relationships of responsibility rather than authority. Across contexts, Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies function as the organising logic for determining relevance, interpreting change, and defining success. They illuminate forms of impact that remain invisible within dominant frameworks, showing how learning, aspiration, leadership, and wellbeing emerge through collective, relational, and cultural processes.
Across UTS, WSU, and Griffith, shared lessons emerge. Culturally grounded evaluation affirms identity, nurtures belonging, and positions evaluators as relationally accountable rather than externally authoritative. Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies do not operate as supplementary additions; they offer a fundamental reorientation of what counts as evidence, success, and justice in higher education. Yet institutional systems continue to privilege efficiency, hierarchy, and narrow metrics of attainment, making it difficult for relational, community-defined success indicators to gain recognition.

While these approaches are deeply grounded in Indigenous worldviews, their underlying principles are not culturally exclusive. Values such as reciprocity, relational accountability, collective meaning-making, and ethical responsibility have broader significance and can strengthen evaluation practice across diverse cultural groups, including non-Pacific communities, when applied with integrity and respect for their origins. Meaningful engagement requires universities to invest in capacity-building, advocacy, and flexible evaluation designs that uphold culturally responsive, community-led methodologies (Rigney 1999; Smith 2012; Walter & Andersen 2013; Tamasese & Parsons 2014). Western tools may still have utility, but within Indigenous frameworks they must be reshaped to serve relationships rather than govern them.

Conclusion

Reimagining evaluation through Indigenous epistemologies is not an optional enhancement but a necessary reorientation if Australian higher education is to pursue genuine educational justice. This shift is required because dominant, compliance-driven models are grounded in epistemic assumptions of universality, standardisation, and technical rationality that privilege efficiency and quantifiable outputs while obscuring relational, cultural, and community-defined forms of success.

Across the literature, dominant evaluation models in higher education are shown to be shaped by technical rationalism that privileges efficiency, linearity, and quantifiable outputs, narrowing complex educational questions into technical problems and reinforcing existing colonial hierarchies and deficit framings of Indigenous communities (Biesta 2007; Smith 2012; Cram 2016). At the same time, scholars emphasise that quantitative and qualitative methodologies alike can be re-envisioned through Indigenous worldviews, where data practices are aligned with sovereignty rather than extraction (Walter & Andersen 2013). In this framing, rigour is secured not through standardisation or control but through reflexivity, ethical responsibility, and accountability to communities (Lather 2007).

Our case studies from the University of Technology Sydney, Western Sydney University, and Griffith University illustrate how Indigenous-Pacific epistemologies offer paradigms that reconfigure evaluation as a relational practice grounded in reciprocity, belonging, and ethical

accountability. These epistemologies generate indicators such as cultural identity, community trust, and intergenerational aspiration. These forms of evidence remain structurally invisible within mainstream frameworks like SEHEEF, not because they lack legitimacy, but because the

frameworks were never designed to recognise relational or community-defined success. These Indigenous approaches are deeply grounded in cultural worldviews, yet the values they embody relationality, reciprocity, care, collective accountability are transferable across cultural groups, benefiting Pasifika and non-Pasifika communities alike by broadening what higher education understands as meaningful learning and success.

The implications for policy, practice, and research are profound. National frameworks must embed Indigenous sovereignty by recognising relational and cultural indicators alongside access, retention, and completion. Institutions must resource community-led evaluation, develop Indigenous leadership capacity, and shift organisational logics from compliance to relational accountability. For research, advancing Indigenous-led scholarship requires redefining rigour as ethical responsibility, cultural integrity, and reciprocity rather than control or standardisation. This demands not only methodological change but structural change, including the redistribution of evaluative authority and the centring of Indigenous voices in decision-making.

When evaluation is treated as a site of relationship, reciprocity, and transformation, it ceases to be a mechanism of surveillance and becomes a practice of justice. The challenge for Australian higher education is now unmistakable - to continue upholding frameworks that define rigour through compliance and institutional authority, or to embrace approaches that define rigour through relationality, accountability, and justice. Evaluation can remain a tool that reproduces the status quo, or it can be reclaimed as a practice that honours Indigenous ways of knowing, nurtures belonging, and affirms the self-determined success of the communities' universities are meant to serve. The future of evaluation in higher education depends on whether rigour is measured by control or by justice.

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