Matters of deep concern are being raised within the University of Melbourne and the Indigenous community on the way the selection processes are been administered and used for employment in Indigenous Studies teaching and Cultural knowledge management positions. Both positions offered opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to continue to advance their career prospects within the academy. On closer examination however the opposite is happening with the two positions in question going to non-Indigenous career advancement.

Here lies the conundrum within the system of increasing Indigenous employment levels to its parity projections of 2015-2020. To reach its target of 2.6% by this year 2020, Uni Melb needed to employ an extra 100 Indigenous staff from 2015 to 2020, or 20 per year. On current estimates, Uni Melb is far behind the 8 ball in its delivery outcomes - see Articles NITV News, 24 August, 2020; Jacynta Krakouer, Guardian, 20 August, 2002; Robyn Oxley, NITV News, 12 August, 2002

The benchmark of employment criteria for these positions by comparison with previous selection processes has created an unjust impediment for Indigenous applicants. If they were designated/identified positions with the key selection criteria striking a balance between academic and Aboriginality criteria, including cultural, epistemological and community based protocols, they would reflect a more culturally appropriate selection process. The emphasis on having a PhD as the benchmark for eligible selection favors white socio economic status and privilege. One must remember the comparative socio-economic and cultural backgrounds in higher education and the history of disadvantage that continues to impede Indigenous Australians in the Closing the Gap scenario. Just over a generation ago there was only a handful of Indigenous people studying in Universities in Australia and while that has changed considerably we are still in catch-up mode and on current statistics have made a remarkable comeback in Higher Education outcomes. This is clearly evidenced by Indigenous media outlets highlighting the continuing number of proud graduates achieving higher education at the state and national level.

In assessing educational outcomes on the basis of PhD requirements for academic positions, I can draw on those measures that helped me and others to gain permanent employment in the Indigenous Studies program. The selection process was adapted more to the principle of Aboriginality being key criteria and the selection criteria catered for those of us who did not have PhD at the time but were in relative stages of completion. A relevant case study in the way the University of Melbourne successfully adapted its selection processes to cater for those needs can be cited in the following examples.
The year 2000 was an historic period that marked beginning of significant changes in the way the Indigenous Studies program was being administered and delivered at the University of Melbourne. There were a number of us at the University who had been teaching Indigenous Studies on a sessional and part-time basis for some time. Our aspirations for permanent employment were raised when some positions became available for lectureships in the various disciplines of Indigenous Studies. These were in Political Science, Cultural Studies, History, Anthropology and Education, all of which were secured by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants including the inaugural Chair of Indigenous Studies.

The crucial distinction to make here is that none of the successful applicants had PhDs, which was not an impediment to employment at the time. All had post grad qualifications and the conditions of selection and employment allowed us to continue our PhD studies on the job so to speak. The added advantage of combining your teaching with your PhD studies in the disciplines being taught was a welcome call. Indeed I believe that all of the cohort of the reinvigorated Indigenous Studies program achieved their PhDs including one who went to Monash under the same arrangement and returned to the University of Melbourne as Director of the Indigenous Studies program. The irony is that we all got our PhDs free of the encumbrance of a PhD being a mandatory requirement at the outset.

In the final analysis, the key question is why has the criteria changed thus depriving other eligible applicants of the same opportunities to secure employment inclusive of doing a PhD on the job, rather than the benchmark of a PhD being used to deny Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants of the same opportunities. In that context and the Universities statutory and formal obligations to Indigenous employment, the recent positions going to non Indigenous people cannot be justified.

The ever pervasive raising the bar syndrome and the level playing field mythology still exists in Indigenous Affairs including education. That is no sooner you get within reach of what is and always has been morally and rightfully yours by birthright, it is whisked away by colonial and political deception.

Dr Wayne Atkinson
Senior Fellow
School of Social and Political Science
University of Melbourne
http://waynera.wordpress.com/