

Pat Dudgeon on Decolonising Psychology

From a young age, Professor Pat Dudgeon AM knew she wanted to help others. Today, Pat is leading the quest to decolonise psychology across the nation.

For the trailblazing Bardi woman from Kimberley, her approach to psychology has always emphasised a greater need for the discipline to be more culturally inclusive and responsive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – professionals and clients alike.

After packing up her life in Darwin, Pat came to Perth to study at the Western Australia Institute of Technology (WAIT), later Curtin University, and became the first Indigenous Australian to graduate with a psychology degree.

She knows better than anyone the importance of being seen and heard in your field.

“Psychology is a helping science,” Pat says. “I wanted to work with people and be useful. But once I started, I realised that it [the curriculum] was culturally blind to Indigenous realities. It didn’t consider things that are important to us – things like connection to community, culture and Country.

“It was a very alienating experience. I couldn’t see how Indigenous realities fit into mainstream psychology. There has been a lot of advancements since then, but it was hard at the time.

“I think it’s still hard for some students but incorporating Indigenous studies into the psychology curriculum is a start.”

Since then, Pat has worked tirelessly to transform the experience for new generations entering the workforce. In her capacity as the lead researcher for the [Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Project](#) (AIPEP), Pat has carved a pathway dedicated to ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are represented in higher education psychology.

--

AIPEP is an Aboriginal-led project that has gained more momentum than Pat and the team, which includes UWA’s Professor Jill Milroy, Research Fellows Belle Selkirk and Dr Joanna Alexi, and Associate Professor Jeneva Ohan, ever expected.

“We wanted to look at how to put Indigenous studies into the psychology curriculum and increase the number of Indigenous students,” Pat says.

“We certainly wanted to challenge the system, but we honestly didn’t think we’d get that high level of support. It’s been amazing to see.”

The first iteration of AIPEP took place between 2013 and 2016 and produced three core frameworks, endorsed by the Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC) to guide curriculum transformation, student support and workforce capabilities – addressing the gaps at each step of the psychology pathway.

During the 2021/22 period, only 0.7% (approximately 314) of psychologists identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander¹. It is estimated that more than 1,000 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander psychologists are needed to reach population parity.

Research Fellow Dr Joanna Alexi says the more culturally responsive psychology becomes, the more we can build the workforce.

“Prior to AIPEP, students weren’t really learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. They weren’t learning about Indigenous psychology.

“If you can’t see yourself in the profession and you can’t see your realities reflected in education, then you’re less likely to want to study it.”

In 2020, Pat revived the project – AIPEP-2 – under Stream 2 (Empowering the Workforce) of the [Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing](#) (TIMHWP) Project, with the aim to put the frameworks into action and decolonise psychology.

Now, in its third year, AIPEP-2 has already brought about some tremendous change – and Pat could not be prouder of the team for making it all happen.

“AIPEP-2 now has national representation from Higher Education Providers (HEPs) and leading industry partners across Australia, including peak psychology bodies.”

Research Fellow Belle Selkirk says: “AIPEP-2 has built a national Community of Practice of HEP psychology educators. This includes Heads of Schools of Psychology, senior lecturers, Honours coordinators – people who oversee curriculum and psychology student support.

“AIPEP-2 Community of Practice members come together every month in a safe space, to plan the roadmap for change of how to decolonise and Indigenise psychology curriculum and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander psychology students.

“We now have 34 HEPs participating in the AIPEP-2 Community of Practice. This is approximately 80% of all HEPs across Australia that offer APAC-accredited psychology courses.”

But as with any great feat, there is still a lot of work to be done. Over the next year, Pat and the team will wrap up their National Scoping Study (an online survey designed to gather the experiences of HEPs that offer a psychology program on their approaches to decolonising psychology curriculum and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students), as well as the development of a Psychology Supervisor Guide, in collaboration with the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (AIPA).

“There is no project quite like AIPEP and we are so excited to bring people along with us on this journey,” Pat says.

--

For Australia’s first Indigenous psychology graduate, Pat is optimistic that our society is moving towards a better future.

She encourages students to embrace different perspectives and broaden their skillset as much as they can.

“The pursuit of any kind of study, whether it’s psychology or another discipline, is not easy, but you have stay determined,” she says.

“There are patches that are going to be more challenging than others. The main thing is to love what you do and keep your end goal in sight.”



Professor Pat Dudgeon AM



L/R: Research Fellow Dr Joanna Alexi, Professor Pat Dudgeon and
Research Fellow Belle Selkirk