

Universities warned on ‘flimsy evidence’ of Aboriginality

MICHAEL MCKENNA, STEPHEN FITZPATRICK THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM JUNE 11, 2016



A national register of indigenous people has been proposed by academic and activist Stephen Hagan. Picture: Lyndon Mechielsen.

Indigenous-specific enrolments and scholarships at Australian universities are being awarded to students with “flimsy evidence” of their heritage, according to one of the nation’s leading Aboriginal academics.

Bob Morgan, head of the University of Newcastle’s indigenous Wollotuka Institute, has joined a push for tougher checks across the community of claims to Aboriginality and benefits, which in some cases are given on the back of a single statutory declaration.

A forum of native title holders, indigenous leaders and regulators in Sydney has been told of suspected rorting at universities, in the public service and in gaining access to government grants.

A national register of indigenous people was proposed by academic and activist Stephen Hagan and backed by the chairman of the Prime Minister’s Indigenous Advisory Council, Warren Mundine. Dr Hagan said the register was needed to stop “the problem of fake Aboriginals”, which could include people on Federal Court-vetted records of native title claimants.

“A first nations register is needed to eliminate the concerns around the

A first nations register is needed to eliminate the concerns around the authentication of Aboriginality of an individual,” he said. “People who cannot provide genealogical proof of an apical (kinship) ancestor that links them to a tribe can have their name entered into the register for a period of 12 months until they can prove their links to a tribe.”

The forum heard there had been a “gradual watering-down” of the federal test of Aboriginality, requiring proven indigenous descent, self-identification and acceptance by an Aboriginal community. Professor Morgan said the problem had now emerged in the university sector, where student applications for indigenous - places, scholarships and other support were being accepted with little evidence. In some instances, he said, a statutory declaration of self-identification had been accepted.

“I share a concern within the academic community about the lack of appropriate processes to determine the bona fides of claimants to Aboriginality,” Professor Morgan said. “It has become more problematic as both state and federal governments have put in place programs to best serve the interests and aspirations of Aboriginal people.

“There is no doubt people are taking advantage of poor process to get a benefit they are not entitled to, with evidence that could be described as flimsy at best.”

Indigenous Australians are under-represented in the university system. About 1.4 per cent of enrolments in 2010 were from Aboriginal people, who make up 2.2 per cent of the student population. Professor Morgan, chairman of the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education, said he was in talks with the University of Newcastle to develop tighter guidelines that could serve as a model for the sector. “There needs to be a lot of discussions, we are aware of enrolments being accepted on the basis of a DNA test report that says a person has some Aboriginal ancestry,” he said. “But I have a distant relative who was Welsh; does that make me Welsh?

“There has to be links into the community, but there is also a question about what to do about those of the Stolen Generation who may have grown up without - Aboriginal connections.”

He said there was no suggestion any of the 1000 University of Newcastle indigenous students were not entitled to claim Aboriginality.

In February, NSW Land Rights Act registrar Stephen Wright disqualified a claim of Aboriginality by a public servant who had held the Aboriginal-identified position of regional general manager of the Aboriginal Housing Office. Laurinne Campbell had relied on land council vetting to secure the position in Dubbo, NSW, and later set up an indigenous corporation with her family.

