Whose Knowledge Counts? Western Accreditation, University Rankings, and the Marginalization of Indigenous Institutions

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ABSTRACT

The global higher education landscape is increasingly dominated by Western-centric accreditation standards and university ranking systems, often framing institutional quality and legitimacy through a narrow, Euro-American lens. This dominance has significant implications for Indigenous universities and knowledge systems, which are frequently marginalized or devalued despite their critical contributions to cultural preservation, community engagement, and locally relevant scholarship. Drawing on a critical review of accreditation frameworks, global ranking methodologies, and case studies of Indigenous institutions, this paper interrogates whose knowledge is prioritized in global higher education. It highlights the structural inequities that favor Western epistemologies, the challenges Indigenous universities face in gaining recognition, and the broader consequences for educational sovereignty and epistemic justice. The study advocates for reconceptualizing quality assurance and recognition systems to inclusively value diverse epistemologies, promote culturally responsive higher education, and advance the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge within global academic discourse.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, higher education, accreditation, university rankings, epistemic justice, educational equity, decolonization, knowledge sovereignty.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary global higher education landscape, standards of quality, legitimacy, and prestige are overwhelmingly shaped by Western accreditation systems and international university ranking frameworks. These evaluative mechanisms, deeply rooted in Euro-American epistemologies and neoliberal performance logics, serve as powerful instruments through which institutional status, funding allocation, and academic mobility are determined (McKenna, 2024). Such systems disproportionately valorise metrics like research output, citation impact, and reputational surveys, often at the expense of locally grounded, community-embedded, and Indigenous forms of knowledge production (QS World University Rankings, 2025; Bellantuono et al., 2021). Critics argue that these evaluative tools are not neutral; rather, they reflect and reinforce structural inequities embedded within global academic hierarchies, privileging institutions aligned with dominant Western epistemic norms while marginalising diverse epistemologies and educational missions (UNESCO, as cited in *College and university rankings*, 2025).

The privileging of Western epistemologies in accreditation and ranking systems is symptomatic of what decolonial scholars term the coloniality of knowledge, a process through which Western modes of knowing and institutional legitimacy are normalised as universally valid, marginalising non-Western, Indigenous, and local knowledges (Quijano, *coloniality of knowledge*, 2025). This dynamic produces epistemic injustice, in which Indigenous knowledge systems and scholars are systematically devalued or rendered invisible within mainstream higher education structures (Duria, 2025). From an epistemic justice perspective, such exclusion perpetuates both testimonial and hermeneutical harms, whereby Indigenous voices are denied authority and interpretive frameworks are constrained by Western conceptual assumptions (Ajmani et al., 2024; Duria, 2025). Western accreditation frameworks often demand conformity with standards grounded in Western pedagogical and research paradigms, privileging written outputs, positivist methodologies, and quantifiable impact indicators. These criteria can conflict with Indigenous educational philosophies that prioritise oral transmission, relational accountability, community reciprocity, and holistic forms of knowledge validated by Indigenous communities themselves (African Rural University case;

Maali, 2025). Such epistemic dissonance raises critical questions about what constitutes "quality education" and who gets to define it, as Indigenous institutions that foreground cultural continuity, language revitalisation, and community service may find themselves assessed as deficient when judged by dominant Western benchmarks (Maali, 2025; *Embedding Indigenous knowledge*, 2025).

Moreover, global university rankings have been critiqued for their territorial bias and homogenising effects, which favour institutions operating within contexts characterised by high research funding, established publication infrastructures, and extensive global networks (Territorial bias in university rankings, 2025). These biases compound existing inequalities, limiting the visibility and perceived legitimacy of Indigenous-led universities and colleges that pursue alternative educational missions centred on social transformation, local sustainability, and intergenerational knowledge stewardship. The competitive emphasis on reputation and research productivity can also incentivise metric-driven behaviours that distort scholarly priorities, further marginalising forms of scholarship rooted in Indigenous epistemologies and community-engaged praxis (Meho, 2025).

The marginalisation of Indigenous institutions in accreditation and ranking regimes not only reflects epistemic exclusion but also carries tangible consequences for educational sovereignty and cognitive justice, the right of diverse knowledge systems to exist, thrive, and inform local and global problem-solving (Visvanathan, *cognitive justice*, 2025). Achieving epistemic and cognitive justice requires reconceptualising quality assurance and recognition mechanisms such that they meaningfully value plural epistemologies, including Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, and support institutions whose missions differ from Western norms. This re-conceptualisation challenges the universalist assumptions of current frameworks and calls for transformative approaches that centre Indigenous knowledge systems in academic evaluation and institutional legitimacy.

In light of these concerns, this paper examines the intersecting power dynamics of Western accreditation, global rankings, and Indigenous higher education institutions. It interrogates whose knowledge counts in the global academy and explores pathways toward epistemic pluralism and educational equity. By highlighting structural inequities in dominant evaluative regimes and amplifying examples of Indigenous educational models that resist marginalisation, this study seeks to contribute to emerging dialogues on decolonising higher education and advancing more inclusive, culturally grounded frameworks of academic legitimacy.

Table 1 – Key Features of Western Accreditation and Ranking Systems

Feature	Description	Implications for Indigenous Institutions	Representative Sources
Standardized Metrics	Measures such as research output, citation counts, and global reputation.	Favors institutions with strong research infrastructure; undervalues community-embedded knowledge.	McKenna (2024); Bellantuono et al. (2021)
Benchmarking	Compares institutions globally based on standardized criteria.	Indigenous institutions often appear lower in rankings despite local relevance.	QS World University Rankings (2025); Shahjahan & Kezar (2020)
Research-focused Evaluation	Prioritizes quantitative research metrics over teaching, culture, or community impact.	Marginalizes culturally grounded pedagogies and Indigenous knowledge practices.	Estera et al. (2016/2025); Duria (2025)
Reputation Surveys	Measures perceived prestige via academic and employer surveys.	Reputation often tied to Western-centric visibility, ignoring Indigenous contributions.	Bellantuono et al. (2021); McKenna (2024)

LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial body of research has critically examined the role of Western accreditation systems and international university rankings in shaping the global higher education landscape. Scholars argue that these mechanisms operate as powerful instruments of neoliberal governance, embedding market logics, competitive hierarchies, and metric-driven performance criteria into institutional behaviour (McKenna, 2024). Rankings are not neutral indicators of quality; rather, they reflect a set of interests aligned with global marketization, often privileging research intensity, citation impact, reputation surveys, and resource concentration, criteria which tend to advantage well-resourced Western institutions and marginalise others (McKenna, 2024; Gadd, 2021). Critics contend that such frameworks encourage homogenisation, draw focus away from teaching excellence and social responsibility, and reinforce epistemic hierarchies that undervalue locally meaningful forms of knowledge and educational missions (UNESCO as cited in *College and university rankings*, 2025; Gadd, 2021).

Research on university rankings' methodological limitations shows that the core indicators predominantly measure outputs associated with research volume and international reputation, rather than contextual relevance or community impact (Selten et al., 2019). These metrics create structural biases that favour institutions embedded within global research networks and rich publication infrastructures, thereby disadvantaging universities from the Global South and those that prioritise mission-driven, community-engaged educational approaches (Bellantuono et al., 2021; *College and university rankings*, 2025). Efforts to develop "fairer" ranking methodologies through complex network approaches reveal persistent systemic inequities in how institutional performance is conceptualised and measured (Bellantuono et al., 2021).

A growing strand of scholarship applies postcolonial and decolonial lenses to critique rankings and accreditation regimes. Shahjahan and colleagues argue that global university rankings are embedded within modernity discourses that naturalise standardisation, competition, and Western epistemic norms, constraining the imaginative space for alternative conceptualisations of higher education (Estera et al., 2016/2025). These critiques emphasise the need to question foundational assumptions underlying evaluative systems—such as what counts as evidence, whose voices shape definitions of quality, and what forms of knowledge are privileged or excluded (Estera et al., 2016/2025).

Indigenous scholarship and research on Indigenous higher education further illuminate the marginalisation of Indigenous epistemologies within mainstream academic structures. Empirical studies of Indigenous postgraduate experiences highlight institutional barriers including racism, cultural isolation, and a lack of recognition or value for Indigenous methodologies (Anderson et al., 2025). These structural obstacles are reinforced by evaluative cultures that privilege Western research norms, such as positivist approaches and published outputs, over community-based, relational, and Indigenous knowledge practices (Anderson et al., 2025). This literature underscores the importance of culturally grounded support systems and decolonised academic spaces for Indigenous students and scholars to thrive (Anderson et al., 2025).

Studies focusing explicitly on Indigenous-serving institutions, such as intercultural universities in Mexico, illustrate how locally grounded educational models can serve as counterpoints to dominant Western higher education paradigms. Intercultural universities were established in response to the under-representation of Indigenous populations in Mexican higher education and are designed to embed intercultural dialogue and cultural relevance into curricula (Intercultural Universities in Mexico, 2025). However, the lack of systematic inclusion of such institutions in global ranking and accreditation narratives underscores persistent epistemic exclusion.

Together, these literatures reveal a complex web of power relations, epistemic hierarchies, and evaluative practices that shape the global higher education ecosystem. They demonstrate that dominant quality assurance mechanisms are entangled with broader socio-political logics that prioritise Western modes of knowing, measuring, and governing educational institutions, often to the detriment of Indigenous knowledge systems and institutionally embedded epistemologies (McKenna, 2024; Estera et al., 2016/2025; *College and university rankings*, 2025).

Table 2 – Challenges Faced by Indigenous Higher Education Institutions

Challenge	Description	Example	Source
Testimonial Injustice	Indigenous knowledge undervalued in formal accreditation and rankings.	Indigenous research is often dismissed as "non-rigorous."	Fricker (2007); Duria (2025)

Hermeneutical Injustice	Lack of frameworks to interpret Indigenous knowledge meaningfully.	Accreditation standards do not account for oral traditions.	Duria (2025); Ajmani et al. (2024)
Resource Inequities	Limited funding, infrastructure, and research networks.	Smaller Indigenous universities struggle to meet Western publication metrics.	McKenna (2024); Anderson et al. (2025)
Cultural Marginalization	Curricula and research priorities often misaligned with Indigenous missions.	Focus on global rankings reduces emphasis on language preservation.	Maali (2025); Visvanathan (2009)
Visibility Constraints	Low participation in global academic policy dialogues.	Indigenous institutions rarely included in ranking methodology discussions.	Shahjahan & Kezar (2020); Intercultural Universities in Mexico (2025)

LITERATURE GAPS

Despite significant insights, several critical gaps persist in the literature:

1. Limited focus on Indigenous institutions themselves: While critiques of rankings and accreditation systems are well established, there is scant empirical research that centres Indigenous universities or Indigenous-led higher education institutions as primary subjects of study. Much of the existing critique extrapolates from broader discussions of global rankings rather than analysing how specific Indigenous institutions navigate, resist, or reframe these evaluative regimes.
2. Intersection of accreditation and Indigenous epistemologies: Few studies directly interrogate how accreditation processes structurally disadvantage Indigenous knowledge systems. Accreditation literature tends to focus on procedural efficiency or quality assurance benchmarks, with limited engagement with decolonial critiques that foreground epistemic justice and cultural validity.
3. Neglect of Indigenous conceptualisations of quality: Current research often assesses Indigenous educational experiences within frameworks designed for Western institutions. There is a lack of literature on Indigenous criteria for educational quality and success—criteria grounded in cultural continuity, community service, language revitalisation, and relational accountability— that challenge dominant evaluative paradigms.
4. Global representation bias: Much of the empirical work on Indigenous student experiences comes from settler colonial contexts like Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. There is insufficient representation of Indigenous higher education issues from diverse global regions, including Latin America, Africa, and the Pacific Islands, which limits the generalisability and richness of critical perspectives.
5. Alternative evaluative models: While theoretical critiques of rankings and accreditation proliferate, there is limited scholarly work proposing concrete, actionable alternative models that operationalise epistemic pluralism or decolonised accreditation frameworks in practice.

Addressing these gaps is essential for developing more inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive systems of institutional evaluation and legitimacy that authentically recognise Indigenous knowledge and educational missions.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in three interrelated theoretical perspectives: Decolonial Theory, Epistemic Justice, and Cognitive Justice. These frameworks provide a lens through which to examine the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge in global higher education, the dominance of Western accreditation and ranking systems, and the implications for Indigenous institutions and educational sovereignty.

Decolonial Theory

Decolonial theory offers a critical lens to interrogate the persistent influence of colonial structures, ideologies, and epistemologies in contemporary higher education (Mignolo, 2018; Quijano, 2025). Central to this perspective is the concept of the coloniality of knowledge, which refers to the systemic privileging of Western ways of knowing as universal standards of truth, legitimacy, and quality. In the context of global university rankings and accreditation

systems, decolonial theory highlights how Western criteria—such as publication output, citation metrics, and global reputation—establish a hierarchy of institutions that inherently disadvantages Indigenous universities and non-Western epistemologies (Shahjahan & Kezar, 2020; McKenna, 2024).

Applying decolonial theory to this study allows for a critical examination of structural inequities embedded in evaluative frameworks and supports the interrogation of whose knowledge is legitimized within global higher education. It also frames the pursuit of educational decolonisation as a process of recognising and validating Indigenous epistemologies alongside Western academic norms.

Epistemic Justice

The framework also draws on the concept of epistemic justice, which addresses inequalities in knowledge recognition and authority (Fricker, 2007; Ajmani et al., 2024). Epistemic justice is particularly relevant for understanding how Indigenous scholars and institutions are systematically marginalised within accreditation and ranking systems that valorise Western forms of knowledge production. Fricker (2007) distinguishes between testimonial injustice, where speakers' credibility is unfairly deflated, and hermeneutical injustice, where structural gaps in collective interpretive resources prevent certain groups from making sense of their social experiences.

In higher education, Indigenous institutions often experience testimonial injustice when their research, teaching practices, and methodologies are undervalued due to misalignment with Western academic norms. Hermeneutical injustice manifests in the lack of evaluative frameworks that meaningfully account for Indigenous epistemologies, cultural knowledge, and community-oriented outcomes (Duria, 2025). Incorporating epistemic justice into this framework foregrounds the moral and ethical imperative of recognising and legitimising Indigenous ways of knowing in global education.

Cognitive Justice

Complementing the above, cognitive justice emphasizes the plurality of knowledge systems and the right of all epistemologies to coexist, thrive, and inform public discourse (Visvanathan, 2009; Maali, 2025). Cognitive justice moves beyond critique to advocate for systemic transformations in how knowledge is evaluated, disseminated, and integrated into institutional practices. Within the context of this study, cognitive justice underlines the importance of designing accreditation and ranking frameworks that do not merely reproduce Western standards but also validate educational practices rooted in Indigenous languages, cultures, and community priorities.

For Indigenous institutions, cognitive justice entails institutional recognition, equitable resource allocation, and epistemic autonomy—allowing these universities to pursue curricula, research agendas, and community engagement activities aligned with Indigenous worldviews, rather than conforming solely to externally imposed Western criteria.
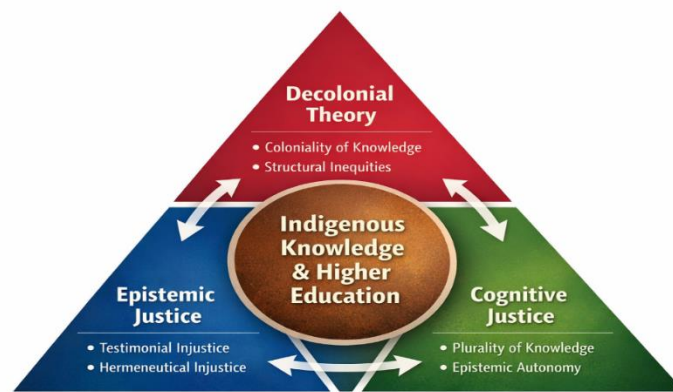
Integrative Framework

The integration of Decolonial Theory, Epistemic Justice, and Cognitive Justice offers a robust conceptual lens for this study (Figure 1). Decolonial theory provides a critical understanding of structural dominance and historical legacies in higher education. Epistemic justice identifies moral and evaluative inequities affecting knowledge recognition. Cognitive justice extends this by advocating for practical transformations that enable epistemic pluralism and the equitable validation of Indigenous knowledge systems.

Through this combined framework, the study interrogates:

1. How Western accreditation and ranking systems shape global perceptions of institutional legitimacy.
2. The ways in which Indigenous knowledge and universities are marginalised or excluded.
3. Opportunities for creating evaluative mechanisms that are inclusive, culturally responsive, and supportive of Indigenous educational sovereignty.

This conceptual framework establishes the analytical foundation for exploring the central research question: *Whose knowledge counts in global higher education, and how can Indigenous epistemologies be legitimised within evaluation systems dominated by Western paradigms?*

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The findings and insights emerging from the literature and conceptual framework underscore the complex dynamics by which Western accreditation systems and international university rankings shape global higher education and marginalize Indigenous knowledge systems. This discussion critically examines these dynamics through the lenses of Decolonial Theory, Epistemic Justice, and Cognitive Justice, highlighting both structural inequities and potential pathways toward more inclusive and culturally responsive evaluation systems.

Dominance of Western Accreditation and Rankings

Western-centric accreditation frameworks and ranking systems operate as powerful mechanisms of institutional legitimacy and resource allocation, privileging Euro-American epistemologies and standardized metrics such as research output, citation indices, and global reputation (McKenna, 2024; Bellantuono et al., 2021). These criteria are often misaligned with the missions and epistemologies of Indigenous institutions, which foreground relational accountability, community engagement, and holistic knowledge transmission (Maali, 2025). As Shahjahan and Kezar (2020) argue, rankings function as instruments of neoliberal governance, imposing a global hierarchy that reproduces existing inequalities and marginalizes non-Western forms of knowledge.

Empirical studies reveal that Indigenous higher education institutions face systematic challenges under such frameworks. For example, research on Indigenous postgraduate experiences demonstrates that students and scholars are frequently undervalued due to their use of culturally embedded methodologies, oral epistemologies, and community-oriented research paradigms (Anderson et al., 2025). These challenges are amplified when accreditation criteria fail to recognize Indigenous metrics of educational quality, such as the intergenerational transmission of

knowledge, language revitalization, and community empowerment (Duria, 2025). Consequently, Western evaluative models inadvertently penalize institutions for prioritizing local relevance over global recognition.

Structural and Epistemic Inequities

The dominance of Western frameworks embodies the coloniality of knowledge, a core concept in decolonial theory, which describes the systematic privileging of Western ways of knowing as universal standards of truth and value (Quijano, 2025; Mignolo, 2018). Through accreditation and rankings, Western epistemologies are normalized as the benchmark of quality, creating structural inequities that constrain Indigenous institutions' autonomy and limit their capacity to innovate in ways that are culturally and socially relevant (Shahjahan & Kezar, 2020).

From an epistemic justice perspective, Indigenous scholars and institutions experience both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice arises when Indigenous knowledge contributions are dismissed or undervalued in evaluative processes due to perceived lack of alignment with Western academic norms (Ajmani et al., 2024). Hermeneutical injustice occurs when the dominant evaluative frameworks lack the conceptual resources to meaningfully understand and interpret Indigenous knowledge practices, effectively rendering these epistemologies invisible in global academic discourse (Duria, 2025).

Consequences for Indigenous Knowledge Systems

The marginalization of Indigenous institutions within accreditation and ranking systems has far-reaching implications for educational sovereignty and cultural continuity. Indigenous universities often serve as custodians of local knowledge, languages, and practices that are integral to community resilience and social sustainability (Maali, 2025; Visvanathan, 2009). When

these institutions are undervalued or excluded from global recognition, it not only limits their access to funding, partnerships, and research collaborations but also threatens the preservation and intergenerational transmission of Indigenous knowledge (Anderson et al., 2025).

Moreover, the competitive and reputational focus of rankings incentivizes behaviours that can distort institutional priorities, emphasizing research output over teaching quality, community engagement, and cultural relevance. This misalignment reinforces the dominance of Western epistemologies and undermines efforts to develop higher education models that are responsive to local needs (Bellantuono et al., 2021; McKenna, 2024).

Opportunities for Epistemic and Cognitive Justice

Despite these challenges, the integration of decolonial theory, epistemic justice, and cognitive justice provides pathways for more equitable evaluation practices. Decolonial perspectives advocate for the recognition of Indigenous epistemologies as legitimate, diverse, and valuable in their own right, challenging the universalist assumptions embedded in accreditation and rankings (Mignolo, 2018; Quijano, 2025). Epistemic justice frameworks emphasize the moral imperative of ensuring that Indigenous scholars and institutions are afforded credibility and interpretive recognition, allowing for the meaningful inclusion of alternative knowledge systems (Fricker, 2007; Ajmani et al., 2024).

Cognitive justice extends these insights by advocating for systemic transformations that recognize plural epistemologies as equally valid, thereby promoting institutional autonomy, curricular diversity, and community-aligned research agendas (Visvanathan, 2009; Maali, 2025). Examples of Indigenous or intercultural universities, such as intercultural universities in Mexico or community-centred Indigenous institutions in Australia, illustrate how locally grounded educational models can thrive when evaluative frameworks incorporate criteria aligned with social impact, cultural preservation, and community empowerment (Intercultural Universities in Mexico, 2025; Anderson et al., 2025).

Implications for Policy and Practice

The discussion highlights several implications for policy, accreditation, and institutional practice:

1. **Redesign of Accreditation Frameworks:** Accreditation bodies should incorporate culturally responsive and community-oriented metrics that recognize Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching, and learning (Maali, 2025; Duria, 2025).

2. **Inclusive Ranking Methodologies:** Global ranking systems could adopt pluralistic criteria that value social impact, community engagement, and knowledge diversity alongside traditional research metrics (Bellantuono et al., 2021; McKenna, 2024).

3. **Institutional Autonomy and Support:** Governments and funding agencies should ensure that Indigenous institutions retain autonomy to design curricula, research agendas, and evaluation practices that align with local cultural priorities (Visvanathan, 2009; Anderson et al., 2025).

4. **Capacity Building and Advocacy:** Indigenous scholars and institutional leaders must be supported to participate in global policy dialogues, ensuring that their epistemologies and priorities are visible and valued in international academic discourse (Shahjahan & Kezar, 2020).

By centring Indigenous epistemologies, knowledge systems, and institutional missions, the global higher education ecosystem can move toward epistemic pluralism, enhancing equity, relevance, and cultural sustainability in knowledge production.

Key Analytical Insights

- Western accreditation and rankings reinforce systemic epistemic hierarchies, privileging Western knowledge while marginalizing Indigenous epistemologies.

- Indigenous institutions face testimonial and hermeneutical injustices, constraining their ability to contribute to global knowledge production.

- Decolonial, epistemic, and cognitive justice frameworks collectively provide actionable pathways for recognition, equity, and culturally grounded institutional evaluation.

- Transformative policy and evaluation reforms are necessary to ensure that Indigenous knowledge counts within the global higher education ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

This study critically examined the dominance of Western accreditation frameworks and international university rankings in shaping global higher education and their marginalizing effects on Indigenous knowledge systems and institutions. The analysis demonstrates that current evaluative mechanisms are deeply rooted in Euro-American epistemologies, emphasizing metrics such as research output, citations, and global reputation, which inherently favour well-resourced Western institutions

while undervaluing the culturally embedded, community-centred, and relational forms of knowledge practiced in Indigenous universities (McKenna, 2024; Bellantuono et al., 2021).

The marginalization of Indigenous epistemologies represents not only a structural inequity but also an epistemic injustice, encompassing both testimonial and hermeneutical dimensions, which undermines the visibility, credibility, and legitimacy of Indigenous scholars and institutions (Fricker, 2007; Duria, 2025). By centring the perspectives of decolonial theory, epistemic justice, and cognitive justice, this study highlights the systemic power imbalances embedded in accreditation and ranking regimes and underscores the importance of recognizing multiple forms of knowledge as valid and valuable (Mignolo, 2018; Visvanathan, 2009; Quijano, 2025).

In sum, the current global higher education landscape privileges Western-defined quality at the expense of Indigenous educational missions, cultural continuity, and community empowerment. Without structural reform, Indigenous knowledge systems will remain marginalized, perpetuating inequalities in recognition, funding, and global influence. The study affirms the necessity of reconceptualizing legitimacy and quality in higher education to be inclusive of Indigenous epistemologies, thereby advancing both educational equity and knowledge diversity.

WAY FORWARD

Addressing the systemic marginalization of Indigenous knowledge and institutions requires transformative strategies across policy, practice, and research. The following pathways are proposed:

1. **Redesign Accreditation Systems:** Accreditation bodies should incorporate culturally responsive and community-relevant criteria that recognize Indigenous pedagogies, epistemologies, and research practices (Maali, 2025; Duria, 2025). This includes evaluating institutions on metrics such as language preservation, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and social impact.

2. **Inclusive Ranking Methodologies:** Global university ranking organizations should expand their evaluative frameworks to include social relevance, community engagement, and cultural contribution alongside traditional research output metrics (Bellantuono et al., 2021; McKenna, 2024). Developing alternative indicators that capture diverse educational missions would reduce epistemic bias and increase recognition for Indigenous institutions.

3. **Policy and Institutional Support:** Governments, funding agencies, and international organizations must provide targeted support to Indigenous institutions, ensuring autonomy in curriculum design, research priorities, and community engagement strategies (Anderson et al., 2025; Visvanathan, 2009). Policies should enable sustainable funding models that reflect the societal contributions of Indigenous higher education.

4. **Capacity Building and Advocacy:** Indigenous scholars and institutional leaders should be empowered to participate in global academic policy dialogues, contribute to the development of inclusive evaluation standards, and advocate for epistemic and cognitive justice at the international level (Shahjahan & Kezar, 2020).

5. **Future Research Directions:** Scholars should engage in empirical studies that center Indigenous universities and communities, investigating alternative models of educational quality and the outcomes of culturally grounded evaluation practices. Comparative analyses across regions, including the Pacific, Africa, and Latin America, will enhance understanding of context-specific strategies for promoting epistemic pluralism (Anderson et al., 2025; Intercultural Universities in Mexico, 2025).

By operationalizing these strategies, higher education systems can advance epistemic equity, cultural sustainability, and inclusive knowledge production, ensuring that Indigenous epistemologies are recognized as legitimate contributors to global academia. The ultimate goal is to create a pluralistic and just educational ecosystem in which all knowledge systems count, and institutions are evaluated according to their societal and cultural relevance, not merely their alignment with Western metrics.

Table 3 – Pathways for Inclusive and Culturally Responsive Higher Education

Strategy	Description	Expected Impact	Source
Redesign Accreditation	Incorporate culturally responsive, community-focused criteria.	Validates Indigenous pedagogies and knowledge systems.	Maali (2025); Duria (2025)