

Beyond cultural competency: A rights-based pedagogical approach to Indigenising Australian university curricula

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Australian universities are working to include the knowledge and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their curricula and student experiences. However, only 1.4% of the workforce identifies as Indigenous. There is growing recognition that non-Indigenous staff play a crucial role in this effort. This article reviews strategies used by Australian universities to enhance the confidence and abilities of non-Indigenous staff in integrating Indigenous perspectives. We address challenges and opportunities and urge institutions to move beyond cultural competency training, advocating instead for a rights-based pedagogical framework to improve educational practices.

Keywords: Aboriginal, cultural competency, curriculum, Indigenous, rights-based

Introduction

Since 1788, the Aborigines of Australia have been subjected in varying degrees to an education system that has aimed to rationalise their dispossession from the land, deprecate their culture and, in general, endeavour to make the Indigenous people of this country lose their rich cultural background and think, act and hold the same values as middle-class Europeans (Albert, 1978, p. 1).

In October 2023, the Australian majority rejected the proposal to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (hereafter respectfully referred to as Indigenous) in the Australian Constitution (Visontay, 2023). This outcome is mainly attributed to insufficient information and has since drawn further attention to the issue of Indigenous rights. It underscores the urgent need to address the lack of information regarding Indigenous people, particularly the systemic absence of accurate, meaningful and Indigenous-led knowledge in public discourse and institutional settings. As Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) argue, dominant institutions often rely on superficial forms of inclusion that fail to engage with the depth and diversity of Indigenous knowledges. Similarly, Eizadirad and Straub (2024) highlight the persistent discomfort and uncertainty among non-Indigenous educators in meaningfully integrating equity, diversity, inclusion and Indigenisation principles into teaching and institutional practice.

According to the latest statistics from the Australian university sector, only 1.4% of staff identify as Indigenous (Australian Government, 2022). Very few Indigenous individuals hold academic teaching and research positions. These specialised educators often play a crucial role in teaching Indigenous knowledge perspectives and leading cultural competency programs for non-Indigenous staff and students. Studies have shown (Page & Asmar, 2004; Thunig & Jones, 2021) that this responsibility significantly impacts their psychological wellbeing, and their opportunities for promotion and career advancement are frequently overlooked.

This paper explores how Australian universities incorporate Indigenous perspectives into their curricula, and examines the training and professional development opportunities available for educators and support staff in the higher education sector. We highlight initiatives that embrace these viewpoints and offer insights into the professionalisation of university teaching, the policies surrounding Indigenous education and the development of effective teaching practices.

Ironically, many educators and support staff in academia lack formal training in effective teaching methods. Teaching in higher education has long been described as one of the “last non-professions” (Baume, 2006, p. 60), with ongoing debates about the appropriate standards or qualifications for effective practice in this field (Greer et al., 2016). Over the years, numerous efforts have been made to professionalise university teaching, including initiatives such as the Higher Education (HE) Professional Standards Framework and formal qualifications such as the Graduate Certificates in Academic Practice (Gibbs & Coffey, 2000). These efforts have often overlooked the inclusion of specific capabilities needed to deliver culturally responsive education. In the context of national policy commitments, such as the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the Australian Universities Accord, there is now growing recognition of the need to build the capacity of higher education sector staff to respectfully embed Indigenous knowledges, perspectives and pedagogies into their practice. This is a critical step to advance equity and improve the overall outcomes in higher education in relation to not only Indigenous student success but representation of Indigenous content throughout the curriculum, which is of benefit to all students.

This paper compares the scholarly approach to professionalising university teaching with emerging strategies for integrating Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum. We also provide a brief overview of the policy context and methodology, followed by a discussion of the results and their implications.

The policy context for Indigenous education

The Australian education system, as a whole, consistently responds to the demands of government policy. Universities Australia (UA) serves as the peak body representing 39 comprehensive universities, with a mission to “advocate for the social, cultural, and economic value of higher education to Australia and the world” (UA, 2017, p. 1). Alongside the organisation’s overarching strategic plan is the UA Indigenous strategy, now in its second iteration. The original strategy, covering the period from 2017 to 2020, committed universities to “increase the engagement of non-Indigenous people with Indigenous knowledge, culture, and educational approaches; and improve the university environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people” (UA, 2017, p. 11).

This strategy was revised in 2022, reaffirming the commitment to the above with the inclusion of several additional areas of focus, specifically curricula and graduate outcomes: “Universities have Indigenous content in curricula that is meaningful, appropriately developed and appropriately resourced.

Universities ensure students graduate with an awareness of Indigenous values and knowledges” (UA, 2022, p. 55).

A theoretical framework of a rights-based pedagogical approach

We advocate for a rights-based pedagogical framework that integrates Indigenous perspectives into curricula (Anderson et al., 2024; Anderson & Ma Rhea, 2018). This approach reimagines education through an Indigenous lens, emphasising cultural sovereignty and self-determination for Indigenous students. This framework transcends traditional deficit-based models, recognising Indigenous epistemologies and community-defined learning priorities. It positions Indigenous students as active participants in their education, validating their ways of knowing while addressing systemic educational inequities. Ultimately, the framework seeks to create educational spaces that honour Indigenous rights to cultural preservation, meaningful participation and self-representation.

Method

Search strategy

The research team includes Indigenous educational experts from the Walpiri and Murinpatha Peoples of the Northern Territory, as well as non-Indigenous researchers who specialise in Indigenous education and bring an external perspective on the challenges in higher education. By integrating Indigenous and non-Indigenous standpoints, we aim to explore how Australian universities integrate Indigenous perspectives into curricula and examine the training and professional development opportunities available for educators and support staff in the higher education sector. The study draws on secondary data sources as part of a desktop review of institutional approaches (Jayawardena et al., 2020); the desktop review is cost-effective and time-efficient, and offers significant advantages in systematically integrating knowledge, identifying research gaps and providing comprehensive research overviews (Tricco et al., 2018). Our review focused on institutional approaches by examining publicly available data accessible on 41 university websites across Australia from August 2022 to March 2023.

Search terms

The search protocol aimed to identify and examine initiatives, training programs and professional development opportunities that assist staff in integrating Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum. The university website’s search bar utilised specific search terms, including “cultural competency”, “cultural awareness”, “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge” and “perspectives”. These terms were searched individually and in target combination, such as “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge” and “perspectives”, or “cultural competency” and “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge”, or “cultural awareness” and “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge”.

Initiatives inclusion and exclusion criteria

The search encompassed professional development and training initiatives for academic and professional staff from a range of sources, including learning and teaching centres, Indigenous support centres, external cultural consultancy organisations, and university human resource departments. The aim was to identify various training and professional development opportunities available to staff across different institutional contexts. Initiatives and training specifically targeting researchers and students

were deliberately excluded, as this study focused on staff training and capacity-building efforts related to Indigenous perspectives in learning and teaching.

Data management

Data was recorded in a spreadsheet containing hyperlinks to the relevant sources and was shared with the research team for a thorough and detailed analysis of all identified materials. We examined 37 university websites from a total of 41 institutions in Australia. Four universities ($n = 4$) that did not provide publicly accessible data pertinent to the study were excluded from the analysis.

Coding framework

Once the programs and professional development opportunities were identified, we developed a coding framework to ensure consistent and systematic categorisation of the data (Eliot, 2018). The framework was designed to capture three dimensions: (1) program content (e.g., topics covered, specific reference to Indigenous knowledges or perspectives), (2) program context (e.g., target audience, compulsory v. voluntary participation, policy alignment), and (3) mode of delivery (e.g., on-country, immersion, face-to-face, online, workshop).

Data analysis

Coding was conducted manually by the research team, with each program entry assessed for the presence of key terms such as “training”, “learning”, “compulsory”, “orientation”, “awareness”, “knowledge”, “on-country”, “immersion”, “face-to-face”, “online”, “engagement”, and “workshop”, and was recorded as binary indicators (present/absent) in the spreadsheet.

Following initial coding, data was analysed to identify recurring themes and clusters of related codes. Codes with conceptual overlap were grouped together into broader categories through an inductive, iterative process informed by thematic analysis principles (Elo et al., 2014). For example, codes relating to “cultural competency”, “cultural awareness” and “Indigenous knowledge” were examined for similarities in content and purpose and were merged where appropriate.

Where coding discrepancies arose, they were discussed within the research team until consensus was reached. This process ensured intercoder reliability and reduced individual bias in interpretation. The coded data was then analysed to identify frequency counts, patterns, and variations in program design, delivery and requirements across institutions. This systematic approach enabled an objective comparison of how universities publicly present training and professional development opportunities for professional and academic staff to enhance their capacity to comprehend, appreciate and incorporate Indigenous perspectives (Elo et al., 2014).

This process resulted in the identification of five overarching dimensions (typology) that characterise how universities present and deliver Indigenous-related professional development: (1) cultural awareness v. rights-based pedagogy, (2) Indigenous-led v. non-Indigenous led, (3) training (training-focused development) v. scholarly learning (development)¹, (4) optional v. mandatory, and (5) assessed v. unassessed.

Results

Institutional approaches to embedding Indigenous perspectives in curricula

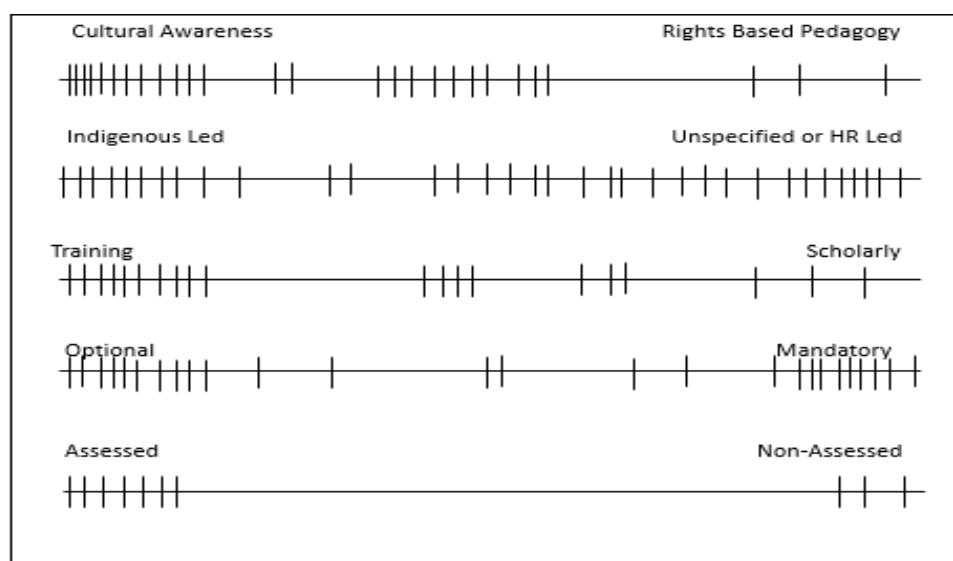
Our analysis indicates that most Australian universities provide publicly accessible information about formal development and training programs to assist educators in integrating Indigenous perspectives into curricula. However, there is substantial variation, with some institutions concentrating on limited cultural competency training while others emphasise comprehensive immersion programs that aim to significantly transform teaching and curricula.

To capture this variation, we identified a spectrum of institutional approaches, represented in Figure 1, which illustrate two philosophical ends of practice rather than a simple binary. Most universities' practical approaches reside between these two extremes in terms of embedding Indigenous perspectives in curricula. The spectrum is defined by five key dimensions that emerged from our analysis:

1. cultural awareness v. rights-based pedagogy
2. Indigenous-led v. non-Indigenous led
3. training v. scholarly learning
4. optional v. mandatory
5. assessed v. unassessed

As shown in Figure 1, the typology provides a spectrum as to variable levels of the key dimensions facilitated/implemented at each identified institution. Marks in the typology were manually generated and based on the degree to which each indicator was observed, including cultural awareness courses compared to rights-based pedagogy, Indigenous-led courses to non-Indigenous led courses, professional development through training versus scholarly, whether the course is optional or mandatory, and the level of assessment that is formal, non-formal or non-assessed.

¹ In this context, "training-focused" refers to short, skills-based sessions or workshops (e.g., cultural awareness or competency training) that prioritise immediate practical application, often without formal assessment. Scholarly development, by contrast, involves sustained, in-depth engagement with Indigenous knowledges through structured programs such as graduate certificates, accredited courses or research-led learning, typically requiring critical reflection and, in some cases, assessment. Most institutions' practices fall between these two ends of the spectrum.

Figure 1²: Typology of institutional approaches to embedding Indigenous perspectives in curricula

Cultural awareness v. rights-based pedagogy

The first characteristic identified on the spectrum of practice, which ranges from cultural awareness to rights-based pedagogy initiatives as described by the National Centre for Cultural Competence, involves “the ability to participate ethically and effectively in personal and professional intercultural settings” (2021, para. 2). Davis (2020) highlights the complex history of the term “culture”, tracing its roots back to Enlightenment thinking and colonial discourses. Western Sydney University (2021) describes culture as encompassing shared beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, language, locality, skin colour, religious beliefs, and traditions and values. The University of Notre Dame Australia (2021) adds that culture comprises a set of unwritten rules that govern how we act and behave in relation to beliefs and values.

Many Australian universities prioritise cultural awareness training (Oliver et al., 2024). Our findings suggest that the emphasis on cultivating knowledge, skills and respect for Indigenous culture is widespread across numerous institutions. Among the identified staff programs, 28 offer cultural awareness training for professional and academic staff. Typically, this includes understanding Indigenous histories, lore and cultural practices. The contextual approaches and features provided by each program varied among institutions. For example, CQUniversity’s workshops explored Indigenous navigation, agriculture, aquaculture, trade and medicine through academic perspectives and storytelling (CQUniversity, 2020).

In contrast, the University of Wollongong’s program presents a comprehensive initiative designed to enhance cultural competency through a university-wide educational effort backed by grants. Jindoala (Jinda-ole-la), co-developed by academic developers at the University of Wollongong and local Aboriginal community members, spans 18 months and unites interdisciplinary teams to foster awareness, understanding and respect for Indigenous knowledge. It also offers participants a collaborative learning environment for knowledge exchange and co-creation (Kennedy et al., 2019). The

² Placement on the spectrum reflects the relative emphasis of each program dimension as interpreted from available descriptions. For example, a brief cultural awareness session was plotted toward the “cultural awareness” end, whereas a program integrating Indigenous rights-based pedagogy was placed toward the opposite end.

program features face-to-face learning alongside an authentic on-country experiential journey to cultivate cultural competence, emphasising an Aboriginal way of “knowing”.

Historically, the fast-paced learning environments of prominent universities have been viewed as disconnected from Indigenous culture and values (Brown, 2019). Wilks et al. (2020) highlighted the strong desire among students and teaching staff for culturally embedded practices in learning and teaching. Alternatives to Western-centric learning approaches, such as Aboriginal knowledge, pathways, face-to-face contexts and community partnerships, were recommended to address this gap. The focus is on pedagogical frameworks that foster collaborative learning and diverse educational philosophies, offering authentic learning opportunities for staff and students to engage meaningfully.

Many universities question the phrase “cultural competence”, considering it inaccurate in defining the skill set offered by short courses. For example, Curtin University discusses the challenges of labelling someone as “competent”, suggesting this implies they have completed their learning (Barrington et al., 2021). Furthermore, Smith and Robertson (2020) contend that cultural competence may suggest “being qualified” in “culture”, in line with the online *Oxford English Dictionary*’s (Oxford University Press, 2021) definition of being sufficiently qualified and having the capacity to adequately handle a subject. The concept of labelling a learner as competent corresponds with the design and development of learning objectives in Australia’s competency-based vocational education and training (VET) programs, which depend on demonstrable evidence of a specific skill (Southern, 2015).

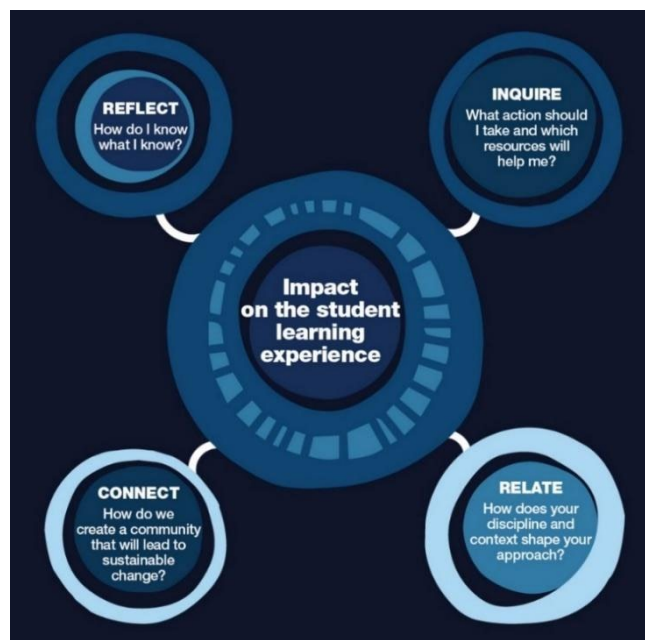
The shift from cultural competency to cultural safety is an emerging focus within the university sector. The University of Newcastle, for instance, emphasises the importance of cultural safety in teaching and learning practices (Gilbert & Tilman, 2017). “Cultural safety” originated in the 1980s within the New Zealand health and education system to represent the experiences of Māori nurses and students (Dune et al., 2020). At the Wollotuka Institute of the University of Newcastle, staff regard cultural safety as a fundamental component of cultural competence, creating a space where individuals can gather safely and meaningfully without the need to justify their identity (Gilbert & Tilman, 2017).

In contrast, some programs prioritise Indigenous sovereign rights as the foundational approach to staff development, such as those at the University of Melbourne (UM), Charles Darwin University (CDU) and Griffith University (GU). Rights-based pedagogical approaches highlight Indigenous human rights as essential within learning and teaching contexts, following the guidance of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (United Nations, 2007). Based on publicly available data, a rights-based approach was less common in university staff learning programs. Nevertheless, three universities offered programs that, to varying degrees, embodied social justice ideologies rooted in a rights-based pedagogical framework.

Queensland University of Technology (QUT) actively applied rights-based approaches and perspectives through sustained workshop engagement within their Indigenous perspectives in learning and teaching modules. The program adapted the work of Anderson and Ma Rhea (2018), who developed a rights-based pedagogical framework for school teachers and teacher educators. Drawing on educational theorists Dewey (1916) and Vygotsky (1978), the framework addresses the pedagogical practices of educators, promoting professional agency in how they transmit their curriculum materials. They raise the following question to teachers and educators: “How might you develop the intellectual curiosity of your students such that they can consider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-settler relations in Australia in a progressive, democratic way?” (Anderson & Ma Rhea, 2018, p. 214). Advance HE (2019) created a rights-based pedagogical framework for a university-wide teaching and learning environment,

grounded in universal human rights. It aims to teach truthfully and respectfully, utilising credible sources alongside historical and contemporary facts. This approach goes beyond a sole focus on curriculum development, which many interventions in the field often emphasise, and explicitly supports staff in engaging with a reflective cycle centred on their impact on students (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Rights-based pedagogy underpinning the integration of Indigenous perspectives in learning and teaching at QUT (Anderson et al., 2020)



Other institutions, such as Southern Cross University (SCU), have also aimed to centre rights in their cultural competency and awareness initiatives. In particular, SCU is committed to embedding an Indigenous approach to scholarship, research and student support as a fundamental aspect of its culture in their reconciliation action plan 2019–2021 (SCU, 2019). SCU’s cultural competency program is based on foundational principles of social justice and the advancement of human rights, providing staff with opportunities in an inclusive and culturally safe working environment (Southern Cross University, 2023). The program includes three distinct components: Interactive Ochre, a multimedia online resource; Courage Conversations, a face-to-face workshop promoting transformative discussions; and the Cultural Diversity and Inclusive Practice Toolkit, an online resource that offers practical guidance.

At Flinders University, the Your Mob Learning program provides all staff with online training in Indigenous cultural awareness. Although not explicitly mentioned, it takes on a rights-based approach, highlighting both historical and contemporary rights from an Indigenous Australian viewpoint. In keeping with the university’s commitment to engaging Indigenous students, staff and communities, it incorporates Indigenous knowledge and perspectives (Flinders University, 2023). The course aims to equip learners with a solid understanding of Indigenous sovereignty, histories, settler colonialism, social and cultural policy, Indigenous self-determination, and their contributions to Australian society.

Indigenous-led v. non-Indigenous led

An analysis of institutional programs identified a second key differentiator: the level of involvement of Indigenous staff in leading programs. An examination of various initiatives revealed that Indigenous programs, primarily executed by Indigenous centres within universities and those contracted externally or conducted by other university departments or external training providers, showed an uneven

distribution across the spectrum of findings. Programmatically, these initiatives employed a range of educational resources, including face-to-face workshops, multimedia clips and online training activities.

Our research identified 11 programs developed and delivered by staff from Indigenous centres. For instance, Macquarie University's Walanga Muru Indigenous Centre aims to utilise education as a means of transformative change (Macquarie University, 2023). The Manawari cultural safety training program consists of three stages: pre-workshop online modules, a face-to-face workshop, and a concluding survey and evaluation. In particular, it supports the university's strategic priority of developing cultural capability through one of its key pillars, Manawari (discover), which outlines the creation of a cultural capability framework and promotes understanding and respect for Indigenous communities, cultures and histories among staff and students. The strategy also highlights the importance of fostering a supportive learning environment and providing cultural training opportunities for both new and existing staff (Macquarie University, 2023).

Programs offered through university Indigenous centres are often ideally placed to provide, facilitate and promote the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples alongside cultural knowledge by leveraging their understanding of the broader institutional environment. For instance, the Northern Institute at CDU offers culturally responsive curriculum development, the Indigenous Research Unit at GU provides cultural competence training and the Indigenous Knowledge Institute at UM hosts Indigenous knowledge symposiums. However, while these initiatives have the potential to cultivate inclusive and supportive learning environments that enhance cultural safety and competence, the considerable effort required to implement transformational change places additional burdens on the limited number of Indigenous staff employed within these centres.

Literature has highlighted the necessity for Indigenous experts to validate resource materials through authentic contributions of stories, lived experiences and Indigenous perspectives (Riley et al., 2015). Furthermore, Smith and Robertson (2020) support this view by contending that Indigenous involvement is crucial in the monitoring and evaluation approaches employed within Indigenous higher education contexts. Anderson and Ma Rhea (2018) add another layer by advocating for a critical examination of curriculum resources and research, making a strong case for the inclusion of discipline-specific Indigenous-led research.

We identified 11 programs that exhibit a range of combined or unspecified led approaches to practice, including inter-university programs overseen by other faculties and departments, as well as through the contracting of external providers and consultants. Batchelor Institute, Australia's only Indigenous dual-sector tertiary education provider, uniquely offers a combination of Both-ways Learning and cross-cultural training designed and facilitated by their on-campus staff (Batchelor Institute, 2019). The institute also provides one-day cultural awareness and safety training sessions, facilitated by Wunun Consultancy and Business Solutions in the Northern Territory (Batchelor Institute, 2021). These examples highlight the diverse strategies employed by Batchelor Institute to ensure comprehensive cultural competency training opportunities for their staff and the broader community sector.

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) have emerged in the market, and universities have embraced them by offering alternative cultural training methods that do not involve face-to-face learning. This approach has gained popularity due to its ability to democratise access to higher education and challenge traditional elitist practices (Lambert, 2020). The National Centre for Cultural Competence at the University of Sydney offers the MOOC Cultural Competence – Aboriginal Sydney, which is freely available to anyone eager to deepen their knowledge and enhance their cultural competence (University

of Sydney, 2022). Using Sydney as a case study, this MOOC emphasises the core theme that Indigenous sovereignty was never ceded, while also highlighting hidden and marginalised narratives of Aboriginal presence within that space.

Training v. scholarly learning

Promoting cultural understanding and appreciation of Indigenous perspectives can be accomplished through two primary approaches: training and scholarly methods. Training centres on developing specific skills and knowledge required for particular roles, primarily with a focus on vocational objectives. In contrast, scholarly teaching incorporates evidence-based practices to enhance educational methods, curriculum design and learner engagement. According to Wood and Cajkler (2018), scholarly approaches entail critical inquiry and pedagogical perspectives, highlighting educational research to inform teaching strategies and assessments. This leads to a more reflective approach when compared to traditional training methods.

We found that both training and scholarly approaches are evident across institutions. However, course design and facilitation depended on various training-related activities, such as online learning modules and face-to-face workshops. Of the 17 training courses identified, 10 were promoted as cultural awareness workshops, which were a vital component of induction training for both new and ongoing staff. Shepherd (2019) describes the workshop as the “flagship” of cultural awareness training, noting that the methods and intensity of instruction and activities vary among institutions. This can include anything from a one-hour seminar to several full days of interactive activities. The remaining seven courses consisted of a series of online videos and learning modules, as well as face-to-face interactive training sessions featuring self-reflection activities and immersive experiences in-country.

Charles Sturt University’s Division of Learning and Teaching Academy offers an online learning program called Gulaay. The term “Gulaay” was bestowed upon the Indigenous Australian Curriculum and Resources Team by Wiradjuri Elder Aunty Gloria Dindima Rogers, meaning “bridge to cross over”. This program features eight online learning offerings, including quizzes and student resources designed to help users grasp Indigenous histories, cultures and contemporary realities (Hill et al., 2020).

This study identified only two universities that explicitly referenced a scholarly approach underpinning their Indigenous learning and teaching development programs for staff members. For instance, the University of Wollongong’s Jindaola program is described as an 18-month curriculum reconciliation journey recognised for excellence in teaching and learning (University of Wollongong, 2022). The program embodies a philosophy of practice grounded in respect, responsibility and reciprocity, enhancing staff capacity to integrate Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives into university curricula. At QUT, the module introduction clearly outlines the pedagogical foundation for the Indigenous Perspectives in Learning and Teaching unit. The program is also constructively aligned with the scholarly Professional Standards Framework that supports Higher Education Academic Fellowship awards.

Scholarly programs have the ability to offer a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Indigenous cultures and perspectives, and they tend to be more effective in fostering genuine cultural competence. Shepherd (2019) contends that workshops often demand more time to develop and fully absorb meaningful content that can be translated back into the workplace and utilised in practice. However, while some scholarly programs might be lengthier than others, they can also be more abstract and theoretical, which constrains their relevance and practical application for certain participants.

Optional v. mandatory

Australian universities vary in their training for cultural awareness among staff. This study identified both optional and mandatory cultural awareness courses in professional development and induction-related contexts. Fourteen universities provided optional cultural awareness courses, including MOOCs that are freely available and accessible to individuals outside the university. In this category, several universities noted that staff attendance was encouraged, either informally or formally, through invitations.

The Australian Catholic University (ACU) offers an optional cultural awareness workshop focused on attendance. However, staff are encouraged to participate in a one-day workshop aimed at enhancing their understanding of the significance of kinship and community for Indigenous students, staff and the wider community (Australian Catholic University, 2023).

The most common form of mandatory training consists of induction programs, with 12 universities identifying cultural awareness or cultural competence as essential components for employment. The Wollotuka Institute at the University of Newcastle provides all required face-to-face induction training, familiarising staff with the university's cultural standards framework (University of Newcastle, 2021). The Wollotuka Institute is a unit within the University of Newcastle, staffed entirely by Indigenous people, responsible for academic programs, research and engagement with Indigenous students (Gilbert & Tilman, 2017).

In the Awabakal language, "Wollotuka" translates to "place to eat and drink" (University of Newcastle, 2021). As part of their successful accreditation bid to the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) (2021), the Wollotuka Institute worked alongside local Aboriginal organisations and groups to re-evaluate the cultural practices and standards observed by the university. This collaboration contributed to the development of a cultural standards framework throughout the university (Gilbert & Tilman, 2017). Additionally, the institute's induction program provides an overview of its history, purpose and future goals.

Quonoey et al. (2022) note that both optional and mandatory cultural teaching have pros and cons. Optional programs encourage genuine engagement, while mandatory ones ensure attendance and access to learning. They recommend a mixed approach to enhance organisational commitment and reduce attrition. Mandatory cultural training should be provided for university leaders and key figures, while optional training could be available for educators looking to enhance their skills.

Assessed v. unassessed

Our research indicated that most institutions did not clearly outline assessment components in their online course materials. We identified seven universities that provide evidence-based outcome assessments. For example, Macquarie University offers the Manawari Aboriginal cultural safety training program, which includes six interactive modules combining face-to-face and online learning. Each module concludes with an assessment that leads to a recognised micro-credential. The university asserts that this micro-credential empowers learners to enhance their contributions to societal change management, deepen their understanding of social justice issues, acquire intercultural perspectives on Indigenous knowledge and cultures, and engage in self-reflection (Macquarie University, 2023). Research shows that well-designed micro-credentials boost learner engagement and course completion rates by offering tangible, measurable outcomes (Tamoliune et al., 2023). For instance, micro-credentials linked to specific competencies, like digital badges, are valued by employers for clearly demonstrating skills.

Moreover, when these credentials align with industry needs, they enhance students' job prospects, as employers prefer credentials issued by reputable institutions (Ahsan et al., 2023; Tamoliune et al., 2023).

Micro-credentialing involves awarding credentials for the acquisition of specific skills or knowledge, typically delivered through short, targeted courses or modules. This approach allows staff to demonstrate their proficiency in cultural awareness by obtaining recognised credentials. Not only does this enhance their professional development, but it also has the potential to facilitate career advancement (Scartezini & Monereo, 2018).

Digital certificates and badges recognise and showcase the completion of learning activities that often require formal assessment. They can be displayed on personal profiles or platforms, symbolising the acquisition of specific competencies in cultural awareness. Additionally, they can be shared across professional networks, enhancing the recognition and visibility of staff commitment to continuous learning (Kanuka & Smith, 2019). Three universities offer non-assessed programs, such as online presentations and self-reflective exercises. For instance, the University of Adelaide provides access via the Future Learn (2021) platform.

In 2011, Universities Australia initiated the Indigenous cultural competency project to provide guidance and direction on cultural competence within the Australian higher education sector (Frawley et al., 2020). Since then, numerous universities have adopted a holistic approach, achieving varying levels of success to boost Indigenous participation in higher education. This includes implementing strategic initiatives and governance that integrate cultural awareness programs (Anderson et al., 2022).

Universities must adhere to funding requirements that prioritise cultural diversity, inclusion and reconciliation. For instance, the Indigenous Student Assistance Grants Guidelines (Department of Education and Training, 2017) specify criteria in Section 13 (Indigenous Education Strategy) for obtaining funding through the Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP). This section highlights the significance of these commitments for financial support and the advancement of Indigenous education. Universities are expected to initiate measures that enhance cultural competency among staff and students in relation to Indigenous cultures, traditions and histories.

Cultural training has been a longstanding practice in universities for over two decades; however, evidence supporting its effectiveness in improving teaching and learning outcomes remains limited (Brennan et al., 2008; Campinha-Bacote, 2002; Cuellar et al., 2008). The ongoing debate revolves around standardised consistency among institutions and determining the most appropriate methods for assessing cultural values and positionality outcomes. Hall and Ainsworth (2013) highlight the deficiencies of current assessment tools, emphasising their poor design, insufficient development and lack of proper standards evaluation.

The Associate Fellow Higher Education Academy (Indigenous) award at QUT assesses the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives into teaching. It recognises staff who demonstrate achievements aligned with the Professional Standards Framework (PSF) from Advance HE (Higher Education Academy, 2011). Published in 2011, the PSF aims to enhance student experiences by improving teaching quality and supports the HEA Fellowship scheme for tailored development programs. The framework has been adopted worldwide, including in Australia and New Zealand, with modifications (Cathcart et al., 2021). QUT's 2019 international pilot program acknowledged educators for incorporating Indigenous perspectives. The Associate Fellow (Indigenous) award, part of the HEA Fellowship scheme, is evaluated

by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous senior fellows. Over 175 Australian educators have received this recognition, resulting in QUT winning an Australian Award for University Teaching Citation in 2023.

Discussion and conclusion

Efforts to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into curricula have achieved varying degrees of success across all sectors of the Australian education system (Anderson et al., 2021). Recent initiatives guided by the national Universities Australia *Indigenous Strategy* (UA, 2022) reveal significant disparities among institutions in the tertiary education sector. Many universities continue to emphasise cultural competency instead of fully integrating Indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is intricately linked to culture, providing the context for its preservation and transmission. This concept emerged in the 1980s within anthropology and ethnohistory, reflecting the connection between people and their environment (Denzin, 2008; McKenna et al., 2021). However, numerous institutions struggle to weave Indigenous knowledge into Western frameworks due to a limited understanding of its complexity (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2007). For over two decades, universities have aimed to include Indigenous perspectives in their curricula, but progress has been slow (Page et al., 2019). Non-Indigenous academics, often charged with this responsibility, find it difficult to understand Indigenous knowledge beyond a colonial framework (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2007).

Towards a rights-based pedagogical approach

The objectives and character of higher education are constantly changing to satisfy societal needs. Nevertheless, a notable resistance to change exists within the Indigenous sector, especially in regards to curricula and pedagogy. Indigenous histories, lifeways and cultures remain largely overlooked in curricula and teaching methods across Australian universities. This ongoing issue continues despite numerous federal and state efforts, alongside initiatives from organisations such as Universities Australia, which rolled out the Indigenous cultural competency framework in 2011. This framework comprises five fundamental principles, with the second principle asserting that “all graduates of Australian universities will have the knowledge and skills necessary to interact in a culturally competent way with Indigenous communities” (UA, 2011, p. 9). Although this framework establishes a benchmark for incorporating Indigenous knowledge into Australia’s higher education landscape, its effectiveness has been uneven.

The renewed focus on Indigenous content requires Australian academics to be adequately prepared. Research by Anderson et al. (2024), Ma Rhea et al. (2012) and White et al. (2013) indicates that educators who are not prepared often rely on dubious, culturally misaligned materials. Often, Indigenous content is merely considered a “tick the box” activity for political correctness. This issue stems from a lack of Indigenous specialists in curriculum development and recognised teaching positions. Our assessment reveals a concerning oversight in measuring program outcomes. In a scenario where assessment greatly influences learning (Boud, 1995), very few development programs effectively support staff in integrating Indigenous knowledge perspectives.

Anderson and Ma Rhea’s (2018) rights-based pedagogical framework for educators sets itself apart by shifting the emphasis from curriculum development to the actual delivery of educational content. Drawing on insights from Dewey (1916) and Vygotsky (1978), the framework stresses the necessity for educators to exercise professional agency in their teaching methods. It challenges educators with the question: “How might you develop the intellectual curiosity of your students such that they can think

about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-settler relations in Australia in a progressive, democratic way?" (Anderson & Ma Rhea, 2018, p. 214). This framework has also been applied in a university-wide teaching and learning context.

This study has limitations due to its dependence on publicly available information from university websites, excluding confidential or internal programs secured behind firewalls. Moreover, the selected search terms may not capture the full range of relevant initiatives, as universities often use varied or evolving terminology such as "Indigenisation" or "First Nations knowledges" to describe similar programs. In addition, the functionality of university website search bars may limit the retrieval of certain resources, potentially omitting relevant content not indexed or described using the chosen terms. Consequently, a more thorough evaluation of the scope and depth of culturally integrated training initiatives offered by Australian universities would enhance our insights into practices in this sector.

It is crucial for the Australian university sector to adopt a more holistic approach to embedding Indigenous perspectives within the curriculum. Our research reveals that superficial strategies still prevail, despite a shared understanding of the necessity for a more substantial educational change. By emphasising pedagogical methods grounded in scholarly evidence instead of relying on cultural competency training programs, universities can develop frameworks that recognise the unique sovereign rights of Indigenous peoples in Australia. This strategy allows the sector to enhance the academic capabilities of staff according to their specific disciplinary contexts and needs, rather than relying on generic resources and frameworks to promote meaningful change.

Following principles of constructive alignment, universities should teach, practice and assess development programs that support all staff in integrating Indigenous perspectives and knowledge.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge Bridget Hughes, Tina Graham, Levon Blue, Ian Davis and Daggi Brunig for their contribution to the pedagogical design and development of the Queensland University of Technology Indigenous Perspectives in Learning and Teaching program.

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Please cite this article as:

Anderson, P. J., Pham, T. D., Cathcart, A., & Kelly, A. (2025). Beyond cultural competency: A rights-based pedagogical approach to Indigenising Australian university curricula. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 54(2). DOI 10.55146/ajie.v54i2.1969



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The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education

Volume 54 | Number 2 | © The Author/s 2025 doi 10.55146/ajie.v54i2.1969
