

## Research Article

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### Author for correspondence:

Stephanie Gilbert,

E-mail: [slg063@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:slg063@newcastle.edu.au)

# Embedding Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies whilst interacting with academic norms

Stephanie Gilbert

The Callaghan Campus, University Drive, Callaghan, New South Wales 2308, Australia

## Abstract

Working in an Institute that centres Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies provides a challenge for the ongoing development of our understandings of Indigeneity and how we embed and embody these understandings. It also creates the opportunity for reflection and development both of pedagogical principles, as well as construction. Trends within the Institute to move to a new degree offering, led the University of Newcastle and the Wollotuka Institute to revisit questions of how to have these conversations together, how to create shared ideas about appropriate approaches and how to translate these shared understandings into real-time outcomes for students studying our courses. These processes are observed here with some examples provided to illuminate the challenging processes taken by experts involved with embodying Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies in this area through all processes of an indigenous centred unit in an Australian university.

In 2017 the most recent iteration for the study of Aboriginal and global Indigenous studies was accepted for offering by the University of Newcastle (UoN). This degree, the Bachelor of Global Indigenous Studies (BGIS) was proposed to be hosted within the Wollotuka Institute of the University (Wollotuka (The Wollotuka Institute 2017)). The following discussion includes a review of the many challenges faced during the development of this degree. These challenges fall broadly into two categories. Firstly working to develop agreement and shared visions within the Institute about Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, shared understandings of Indigeneity and how to mindfully embed and embody these understandings across all of the work of the Institute. Secondly, working within the broader academy and within the wider University to understand how those visions might be more widely understood, supported and academically embodied.

In 2015 the Wollotuka Institute was the inaugural Australian institute to be accredited by the World Indigenous Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) in a process that recognised the work the Institute had done particularly in relation to integrating Indigenous culture, language and worldviews into programming. The activities undertaken to gain this unique accreditation informed the development of the degree and are also discussed here.

## Background

The University of Newcastle has been a lead provider of Indigenous education in the Australian context for more than 20 years including offering the first programme to train Aboriginal medical doctors. Its offerings in Aboriginal studies focused on bridging the educational gap for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students via a Diploma of Aboriginal Studies and were particularly utilised by those Aboriginal adults who had missed out on the opportunity to move towards higher education resulting from earlier educational policies that had locked them out of secondary and tertiary education. These students wanted to have a higher education experience but often wanted a core Aboriginal studies focus. In the late 1990s the programme offering was developed further to offer a Bachelor of Aboriginal Studies (BAS) as a replacement for the Diploma. The BAS degree held onto the localised focus and incorporated curriculum and activities which supported the Indigeneity of those students enrolled. Students were prepared for a marketplace that offered a lot of work to Aboriginal people to work with their own communities, often in community based organisations. By the late 2000s, there was a perception the Aboriginal studies marketplace had changed as many previously shut-out people had now made their way through higher education and those types of enrolments had slowed. In light of this the University's offerings were again revisited, and the Bachelor of Aboriginal Professional Practice (BAPP) was developed. This degree included a new placement component at a third-year level. Whilst all of the previous offerings had been available for all students the dominant number had been Aboriginal students. It was recognised that the ability to speak about and understand the issues at play for

the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities was crucial for all workers and so potential students were recruited from all parts of the Australian community. Some students enrolled in the whole degree but many undertook a select programme via an Aboriginal studies major. These programmes were accredited for offering through the Faculty of Arts and oversight sat via the academic infrastructure but embedded in the Wollotuka School of Aboriginal Studies.

Four years passed and, in 2015, analysis of both the degree and external factors highlighted a need for a revisit of the structure of this programme, the market and long-term goals of such a degree. Some of the aspects of the analysis were:

- WINHEC accreditation requirements;
- Refocusing and embedding the increasingly developed discipline of Critical Indigenous Studies including reflecting international trends and reinvigorating long running subjects;
- Graduate participation in the workforce including innovation, entrepreneurship and leadership;
- Student recruitment and retention issues;
- Graduate identity and attributes;
- Research interests of the academic staff (approximately eight Aboriginal Ph.D. holders) and Ph.D. student-associate lecturers and
- The ongoing development of the Wollotuka Institute.

## Discussion

Some of these areas require some further exploration to understand the nature of each particular challenge.

### *WINHEC accreditation*

In 2011 Wollotuka began its journey of accreditation with WINHEC to gain recognition at an international level of its ability in the areas identified by WINHEC's goals. WINHEC seeks to test whether an organisation's work:

- is framed by the Indigenous philosophy(ies) of the native community it serves,
- is soundly conceived and intelligently devised,
- integrates Indigenous culture, language and worldviews into programming,
- is purposefully being accomplished in a manner that should continue to merit confidence by the Indigenous constituencies being served (WINHEC, 2016).

As per WINHEC's goals, from 2011 Wollotuka entered a period of extensively examining its cultural practices and understandings. It undertook to create a document which identified and discussed the embodiment of local cultural standards at work in the Institute. This process engaged local Aboriginal communities via Aboriginal organisations, such as the local Aboriginal Land Councils and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), to speak together about each of these areas. The exploration included, for instance, which local cultural priorities should be given precedence on Wollotuka's three different campus locations. All of Wollotuka's employees were the result of deliberate employment strategies to employ Aborigines with Torres Strait Islanders also employed at particular points in time. This is a crucial aspect of the development of the cultural standards as their

articulation occurred from within an understanding of the Aboriginal lands where Wollotuka is based. Torres Strait Islanders though are also resident on Aboriginal land and in UoN and needed to be a part of this conversation. Each of the Wollotuka staff members though came from different Aboriginal groups and, whilst working in the same University, their cultural practices differed. At the same time staff of the Institute and local Aboriginal communities both reported finding the process culturally affirming and enjoyable and that the process helped them also learn more about the local area and cultures both within the Institute and community.

The Institute, by then, had existed for 20 years in one form or other, and so the process allowed a recognition and affirmation of the way ideas of cultural safety, protocols and standards had become embedded through that time. The WINHEC accreditation process also encouraged the Institute to further and more closely articulate what was core cultural business, and why cultural business was done the way it was. For example, the Institute recognised the value of speaking to the Aboriginal students as Aborigines, and that their exposure to their histories as Aboriginal people ought to be actively supported and developed. One strategy utilised was to institute a new flag-raising ceremony once a month. Any students and staff of the University, but more particularly Wollotuka, would gather together on a Monday morning of each new month. During that ceremony someone might briefly speak about current issues, and two people would raise the flags (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander). If the flags were to be at half-mast there would be a presentation of why and who that person being honoured.

This WINHEC-inspired process of review also articulated a structured inclusion for Aboriginal community participation into the core work of the Wollotuka Institute and UoN. Working to have community members participate in the life of the physical building at Callaghan campus as well as on boards, committees and review committees of other degrees from within the University was a valuable outcome. Aboriginal community people were utilised in the classroom as guest lecturers, markers and tutors on specialist subjects. We also attempted to have Aboriginal family and community members involved with prospective, new and longer-term student, activities.

### *Building the discipline of Critical Indigenous Studies*

It has been crucial to the development of the Wollotuka Institute to hold central and embed the core perspectives of the developing discipline internationally constructed and understood as Critical Indigenous Studies. Wollotuka shifted from teaching predominantly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the Diploma of Aboriginal Studies to teaching a conglomeration of service courses to the wider university community, as well as specialist offerings in its own degree offerings also available to all university students. This has meant the development of Critical Indigenous Studies language and teaching practice specialised to our region. The discipline of Critical Indigenous Studies is underpinned by indigenous epistemologies and ontologies from across the world (Todd, 2016; Moreton-Robinson, 2017). Critical Indigenous Studies though challenges us to move past only speaking back to western thought or its academy. It must speak to racialised knowledge and whiteness, for instance, illuminating the ways this has spoken for within decolonisation. Critical Indigenous Studies must though crucially enable and be constructed within, a localised ontological and epistemological footprint. This

means there must be present a critically conceptualised symbiosis between local interests, cultural perspectives and the broader goals of a global Critical Indigenous Studies discipline.

The embedding of critical Indigenous perspectives has occurred across both academic and student-centred activities with the core courses within the new degree as enacting the Institute's Cultural Standards. These core courses were aimed to be developed and taught entirely by Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander academics. It is crucial to understand that Indigenous Australians are different from those indigenous to other parts of the world as well as to non-Indigenous academics. The Australian mainland continent has one Indigenous group, the Australian Aborigines. Australia as a nation though recognises two groups as their Indigenous people and includes Torres Strait Islanders whose lands also sit within the Australian nation state. The third group of indigenous people to be considered as potential academic instructors may be those who are indigenous peoples from other lands such as New Zealand Maori. Those people are Indigenous and may be Australian citizens. When designing a degree with both Australian material and international Indigenous material we must recognise the interests and potential inclusion of all three groups. That being said the home of this degree is within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education centre and must reflect its staff and cultural standards. As we are also mindful of our commitment to our local Aboriginal community our relationship necessarily includes a commitment to honouring their knowledges and the physical places where the Wollotuka Institute is based.

The courses included in the new degree attempt two particular actions: one is to re-centre Critical Indigenous Studies; and second to embed the research of Indigenous scholars into the knowledge base taught within these courses. This coursework is both international in nature and speaks to the interests of Indigenous people around the world, but at the same time speaks locally and nationally. Local knowledges, communities and knowledge holders within them are embedded and valued through the implementation into this coursework. We are also encouraged by local communities to assist in teaching young people the history of our communities, and Aboriginal historical relationships and experiences within the Australian nation. This resurgence and re-centring to Critical Indigenous Studies was also driven by the observations of the graduating students that they were not quite as strong as previous graduates in areas such as critical thinking skills, the interpreting of issues relevant to Aboriginal communities and historically significant issues which lead to current circumstances including professional issues like racism in the workplace. That being said, these knowledges and awareness must be taught by Indigenous academics themselves as a central pedagogical philosophy to centring the cultural standards.

The development of the discipline of Critical Indigenous Studies itself has been remarkably strong and significant in the time that Wollotuka has been in existence. Indeed Wollotuka academics have contributed to its robustness via their scholarship. In her 2016 book Moreton-Robinson notes the complexity now apparent in the works which sit within this discipline. Hokowhitu (2016) also challenges us to move forward from a more essentialised view of Indigeneity to speaking to the multiplicity of identities which exist in Aboriginal and other indigenous communities through the world. This includes individuals for instance who might identify beyond a gender binary. As Hokowhitu discusses, many of the essentialised identities were

created to speak back to overwhelming colonising forces which instituted racism at their core. With the development of Indigenous political forces and Critical Indigenous Studies opportunities, to speak from these differing positions has become increasingly possible.

### *Participating in the workforce including innovation, entrepreneurship and leadership*

Over the Institute's history of offering academic programmes the, mostly Indigenous, graduates, have sought and gained fulfilling employment. During the time of the Bachelor of Aboriginal Professional Practice's offering there was a generalised upskilling of the Aboriginal population and hence a pressure was created for the Bachelor to train students to a new level of graduate employability skills. There were not, however, any specific employment skills inbuilt to the programme prior to students undertaking their placement their third-year level of the degree. Discussions with our placement partners have seen the identification of a range of employability skills to be taught alongside the other pedagogical desires. For instance, students were found to need further training in report and submission writing, and other skills such as public speaking. These have included such areas as project/financial/management skills community focus, sustainability focus (social, economic, environmental) and innovation. The new degree embeds many of these areas across core courses and students will undertake a capstone work-based placement or a research project. This answers the criticism of sending students to work without preparing them for the work and expectations the workplace holds.

### *Student recruitment and retention*

Statistics documenting student enrolment and completion of the BAPP indicated the need for a revisit to the core tenets and undertakings of this degree. Enrolments have averaged just below 25 with an average of 15 Estimated Full Time Student Load (EFTSL) (NINA, 2017). Given that an acceptable intake would be 25 or greater students for the first year and then building from there, the statistics showed a clear under performance in this area. The reasons for this lack of attraction and lack of retention are complex but must include questioning who is the audience for the degree, content taught, outcomes for the students. There are a couple of comments that can be made in these areas. The first is that Aboriginal communities have moved on from requiring a top up/catch up of people who missed having the opportunity to go to university. Generally speaking, Aboriginal people aged over 50 have been given access to higher education if they desired it. For younger people there is some desire to be in degrees with traditional areas because although they may identify as Aboriginal along a spectrum from strongly to statistically, they appear to seek degrees that are traditionally named such as teaching, science etc. This speaks to an employment field that recognises those degrees and not so much to degrees with Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal Professional Practice that have not been recognised easily by major employers including the different levels of government. One of the outcomes of the factors described above is the Aboriginal Professional Practice degree has often been utilised as a gateway by particularly Aboriginal students to get their footing in the university and, after a successful year, move to other degrees whose entry requirements were higher. This has had a negative influence on completion

rates even if the courses themselves are performing well. It does often also have positive outcomes for the students who make this choice.

### Graduate identity

Graduate identity attributes are often measured through two sets of attributes by universities. The first is the University wide attributes that all graduates ought to have achieved. The second set of graduate attributes exists at the individual programme level. These are created from within the host unit and speak more specifically to the core values and goals of the specific academic programme.

For instance, the Centre for Academic Development at the Victoria University of Wellington identifies three phases to developing programme specific graduate attributes:

- (1) Identifying the desired results (graduate profile, major attributes)
- (2) Deciding what would constitute evidence of that result (assessment), and consequently
- (3) Developing a plan to produce that evidence (programme mapping and progression plan, course learning objectives, course feedback and assessment plan) (Victoria University of Wellington, 2018).

These phases are useful to understand the development of graduate attributes for the BGIS and more broadly at UoN. The use of graduate attributes has been increasingly part of the dialogue of universities as make an individual stamp on their degree constructions which tie degrees to each other across a university. The other set of useful parameters to recognise are the discipline threshold concepts or standards. These are more often set by the discipline to identify core values and expectations of a profession or discipline. It is worth spending a little more time on these as we have not seen much debate around these for Indigenous Studies in Australia. The characteristics of these threshold concepts are discussed by Land *et al.* (2014). They identify:

- *Irreversible* (once understood a student cannot look at the concept in any other way);
- *Transformative* (once understood significant shifts in perception of a discipline occur);
- *Integrative* (reveals interconnectedness of discipline);
- *Troublesome* (takes a bit of intellectual wrangling) and
- *Bounded* (clear demarcation that this resides within one discipline and not another) (McGowan, 2016).

As McGowan says ‘taken together, these characteristics are implicit in those “Aha!” moments... the moment when the intellectual wrangling leads to transformation and transfer’ (McGowan, 2016).

Why create these threshold concepts? As McGowan (2016) goes on to explain, the concepts give faculty an avenue to link their research to teaching in ‘disciplinary ways of thinking in meaningful and profound ways’. They also structure the way in which the novice can engage with a learning process designed to move them through to ultimately becoming an expert practitioner, but with a particular awareness of the needs of that novice learner. However, fundamentally underpinning these concepts is building conceptual models to include ‘what disciplinary practitioners know, how this knowledge is validated, and if these concepts constitute disciplinary boundaries’ (McGowan, 2016).

As earlier stated, the Institute is heavily invested in ensuring that students undertaking courses benefit from a distinctive high-quality Indigenous academic experience informed by critical discipline-related research. It is crucial hence, to develop both guiding graduate attributes and threshold concepts to both guide the work of the Indigenous academics as well as create a clear pathway to learning for students.

As discussed above courses must be structured in such a way as to embed a student within the Critical Indigenous Studies threshold concepts. This programme is structured to embed these knowledges via core courses as well as embedding our second major set of threshold concepts focused on developing Indigenous-centred work readiness. The Institute seeks to graduate people whom possess a suite of Indigenous-informed skills and academic knowledges readily transferrable to the workplace. Part of this skill base includes the ability to utilise technologies which are accessible, transferable and viable globally. This has led to the creation of clear external messages, such as for student recruitment but also serving as strategic directions within the Institute and the rest of the University and its’ stakeholders. These programme outcomes look like this for example:

Mass programme outcome (MPO) + Specific programme outcome (SPO)

Upon successful completion of this programme in the context of the Critical Indigenous Studies students will have:	
MPO1	A broad and coherent body of knowledge, with depth in the underlying principles and concepts in one or more disciplines as a basis for independent lifelong learning
MPO2	Cognitive skills to review critically, analyse, consolidate and synthesise knowledge
MPO3	Cognitive and technical skills to demonstrate a broad understanding of knowledge with depth in some areas
MPO4	Cognitive and creative skills to exercise critical thinking and judgement in identifying and solving problems with intellectual independence
MPO5	Communication skills to present a clear, coherent and independent exposition of knowledge and ideas
MPO6	Demonstrated the application of knowledge and skills with initiative and judgement in planning, problem solving and decision making in professional practice and/or scholarship
MPO7	Demonstrated the application of knowledge and skills to adapt knowledge and skills in diverse contexts
MPO8	Demonstrated the application of knowledge and skills with responsibility and accountability for own learning and professional practice and in collaboration with others within broad parameters
SPO1	Demonstrated a broad and coherent understanding of the Aboriginal/Indigenous global studies disciplines including Indigenous histories, cultures, principle concepts, decolonisation and other theoretical perspectives (depth in least one related specialist area)
SPO2	Demonstrated cognitive, creative, analytical and critical skills to effectively plan, analyse present and implement activities in the global discipline and related areas
SPO3	Demonstrated a capacity to synthesise theoretical understanding and skills, with a focus on leadership, to effectively plan, analyse, present and implement activities within the discipline and with non-specialist audiences



### **Embodying the interests of Critical Indigenous Studies and the Institute's Cultural Standards**

The courses in the new BGIS degree required some academic resilience and creativity. The two main areas were: (1) the creation of a suite of courses which speak to both our community's history and interests and (2) for further growth into the international arena. Students would need a set of resilient options in the course choices to focus on potentially working internationally in Indigenous informed spaces and at the same time catering to those who wish to work in community oriented work. For some students in the degree programme, their home space is external to Australia and so our development aims to offer all courses online but within the structure of preparing for work readiness.

Our aim for graduates is to be able to demonstrate:

- A broad and coherent understanding of the Aboriginal/Indigenous global studies disciplines including indigenous histories, cultures, principle concepts, decolonisation and other theoretical perspectives;
- Cognitive, creative, analytical and critical skills to effectively plan, analyse present and implement activities in the global discipline and related areas;
- A capacity to synthesise theoretical understanding and skills, with a focus on leadership, to effectively plan, analyse, present and implement activities within the discipline and with non-specialist audiences;
- A critical understanding of ethical and reflective practice to include indigenous-centred perspectives that underlie the globally based discipline.

Scaffolding core courses and core knowledges enables effective learning and balancing the development of skills and knowledges within the ontological indigenous learning space. To embed these needs the first teaching term includes coursework aimed at providing students with a broad understanding of the discipline of Critical Indigenous Studies and its complexity across peoples, societies, economies in all nations where Indigenous people live. In the second-year teaching term students undertake coursework which allows students to master skills and knowledges within the focused lens of Indigenous work and enterprise, community building and culturally affirming practices. Students engage in research, communication and work-focused skill development activities vital for their success. In their third-year level core courses, students will complete their studies with a work integrated learning capstone course, requiring them to integrate the knowledge and skills developed through earlier semesters. This requirement means that students should not be able to undertake the capstone course before undertaking the majority of their coursework and graduate after successfully undertaking a placement which brings together these same skills. This is in response to faculty learning from the Professional Practice degree where some students undertook the 3000-level placement whilst studying in their second year of enrolment. This meant they were not ready to consolidate all of their degree learning in their placement and created additional pressure for both the students and placement hosts when students were in the field. Additionally, students who are externally based may need a project based in their home community or a larger research activity for those looking to move to higher degree studies (Bailey *et al.*, 2012).

### **Developing and embodying a unique teaching and learning approach**

The teaching practices of the Institute work to unite multiple cultural perspectives but hold centrally, as per the Cultural Standards, that we are all knowledge holders. As Gruppetta and Fletcher (2014) argue, all of us teach and learn best by sharing, learning, and doing. As such, we recognise multiple ways of learning and particularly respect the multiple knowledges and pedagogies brought by our staff, students and communities. The complementary strategy to this learning perspective is the decision to employ only Australian Indigenous people in our Institute. This functions to centralise to our pedagogies, teaching and learning to include an emphasis on some indigenous constructions of relationships (Gruppetta and Mason, 2013; Lester, 2016).

Our academics understand the choice to study a subject area is often due to the teacher/lecturer rather than any other considerations (Barnes, 2000). As such, we emphasise student relationships, framed within our sense of cultural and community obligation to care for our students (Gruppetta and Mason, 2013). Learning, though, should be engaging, dynamic, enjoyable and fun as well as demonstrate a supportive cultural experience for our students (Lester, 2016).

Our teaching incorporates the use of reflective learning, connectedness and the integration of knowledge and experience, and allows student choice within the educational framework (Lester, 2016). To make it so, pedagogies utilised within the Institute include group-orientated and peer supported learning within dynamic teaching practices which support students' preferred learning styles (Lester, 2016). At the same time, Indigenous pedagogies also include strategies that must work for all students, not just Indigenous students (Fraser and Hewitt, 2004). Consequently, all content must be culturally appropriate and scaffolding of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ideas and theories occurs over the levels of course offerings to ensure students are well supported in their learning (Milton *et al.*, 2009).

Hands-on learning activities or practical applications within learning are also very important to Aboriginal learners and ensure that students are connected to real world application of their knowledge and learning (Barnes, 2000). This particular knowledge will be important in also developing the work readiness aspect of the students' learning. The work readiness courses are set within a 'situated learning model', in which students are able to learn 'within the context of real-world applications', and assists learning to be authentic, include modelling, scaffolding, collaborative knowledge construction and promotes learner reflection (Herrington and Oliver, 1997, p. 127).

The Cultural Standards encourage the participation of community into our classrooms. One way to do this is inviting community in to speak about their knowledges. Another is to utilise forms of learning that have deep cultural traditions, such as creating assessment tasks which engage students in narrative telling and collecting and then sharing these with community. Courses must be constructed to encourage all students to work in groups using problem-based or problem-solving learning approaches; make significant use of real-world case studies and use authentic assessment which mirrors future work expectations to assess achievement of learning outcomes.

As discussed above there are a number of pedagogies that can facilitate active learning. Active learning involves approaches to instruction that provide opportunities for interaction and involvement focused around clearly defined objectives (Smart and Csapo, 2007). In conclusion then, an active learning environment

facilitates greater student engagement and motivation (more than listening), the development of higher order skills (analysis, synthesis, evaluation) and self-reflection (Gedeon, 1997; Smart and Csapo, 2007).

### Assessment approach

The Institute's commitment to provide a better education experience extends to the way student work is assessed. To facilitate the embodiment of the teaching and learning principles discussed here, and the Programme Learning Outcomes which lead to the graduate attributes being met, a consistent and co-ordinated approach to assessment must be adopted across the programme.

There are many educationists such as Barnes (2000) and others (see Hughes and More, 1997; Ryan 2009) whom advocate the recognition of indigenous learning styles and their implementation in learning environments like veterinary education. We understand deep connections and relationships are crucial to student learning and must include indigenous practices such as group oriented, holistic processes and less individual pursuit at the cost of the group (Barnes, 2000; Gibb, 2006). A range of strategies are employed to enact these beliefs including providing explicit criteria and substantive communication with students around these criteria to ensure students are fully engaged in their learning (Lester, 2016).

As such, assessment tasks for each of the courses are designed to be mindfully distributed across the semester. This means taking into account other expectations being made of the students in other courses as well as stepping students through a process which allows them to evaluate their understanding as they progress through the course and identify any gaps in their knowledge. Crucially, identity and practice are intertwined in indigenous studies and the Institute recognises Gruppetta and Mason (2013) suggestion that relationships are constituent of what you do combined with who you are. Assessment tasks which provide group work and blend learning experiences can assist the learning more social and enhance their learning (Milton *et al.*, 2009).

Every course is designed to have a maximum of three assessment tasks integrated into them. The volume of assessment averages a total of 5000–6000 words (or equivalent in other forms of assessment). As a guide, students will be expected to submit approximately 500 words for 10% of the assessable weighting. Assessment is designed to encourage mastery of evidence, critical analysis and strong argument appropriate for specialised audiences, rather than lengthy description. A variety of assessment task types will be included in each course to facilitate student engagement and development. In some courses these will be designed specifically to encourage a research skill set to be developed and in others work-readiness might prevail.

An indicative/suggested assessment matrix will be developed to support a programme-based view. The approach to learning and assessment will also be scaffolded across course levels. For example, while more formal tasks may be conducted in initial semesters of study, assessment will shift to a focus on project work as students' progress through the programme.

The Institute in the development of the degree specifics will enact a process of assessment growth to both develop specific requirements for assessments but review such requirements mindful of:

- (1) No more than three assessment items per course;
- (2) Given emphasis in the programme on active learning and applied learning, only introductory and/or

quantitative courses may have an exam, not worth more than 30% of the overall marks;

- (3) Where an exam is used, it must emphasise applying knowledge, not recalling it and demonstrating skills (i.e. suitable to a memory aid, limited open book or open book format);
- (4) Courses in the same disciplinary stream must be clearly scaffolded;
- (5) Group work to be encouraged in all courses, but no group assessment to be used unless there is a course learning outcome associated with working in a group; in this case, skills for working in a group are to be part of the curriculum;
- (6) Discussions/oral presentations to be encouraged in all courses, but no assessment of oral communication to be used unless there is an associated course learning outcome and skills for oral communication are part of the curriculum;
- (7) As many courses as possible may be designated as face-to-face and blended/on-line;
- (8) The third-year level capstone course acts as a focal point for assessment in this programme (BGIS Program documents 2017).

Through the utilisation of real-world projects and placements, students will be able to track their progress against the programme learning outcomes and the University's Graduate Identity. Assessment in this course must allow students to assess their own progress and receive clear evaluation on this progress from their placement/project supervisors. Tasks must be of a sustained, authentic and real-world nature which everyday practitioners in the field would recognise. Students work through an extended sequence of learning activities that require the development of essential skills, competencies and attributes.

### Example of pedagogy and assessment regime

In 2013 staff of the Institute devised a floating tool named 'CORE: Culturally Open Respectful Exchange'. It embodied the perspective that each member of staff practices CORE and engages in CORE work depending upon experience and cultural knowledge. The CORE extends to embrace students as part of this community engagement – encapsulating diversity, critical rigour, sustainability and knowledge sharing. CORE is unique and innovative in its cultural interface/spatial 'thirding' approach to engagement and transformation and producing culturally informed tools (Dudgeon and Fielder, 2006; Fletcher *et al.*, 2014). Thirding in this usage refers to the creation of a third space as constructed by Homi K. Bhabha in his text *The Location of Culture* (1994). The first and second space speaks to the home space of different cultures who together create a place to meet in the third space safely. This allows that the home space of these cultures is not threatened in some way by the other.

CORE was applied in a 3000-level course: *Australian Indigenous Language and Cultural Issues Today*. In its essence, the full implementation of the CORE approach included some assessments where students presented their work to senior staff and/or Indigenous Elders or local community. This work was a positive experience where students and staff experienced reciprocity and transformed the learning space into a place of cultural exchange. It transformed community into pedagogy and the

Institute understood this model as honouring our Cultural Standards well (Gruppetta and Fletcher, 2014).

In the new degree it will be clear that a continuation of these new manifestations of teaching and pedagogy must happen, in part because up to 100% of course work will be offered online as well as on-campus.

## Conclusion

Responding to the market forces outlined in this article whilst embedding in complex ways the Institute's Cultural Standards and University expectations has made for a challenging development process. This paper has explained how the Wollotuka Institute met these challenges through a culturally and pedagogically rigorous process. This process included, for example, embedding a concept firstly named in the Cultural Standards, which then must be accounted for in the University's graduate attributes, the programme specific graduate outcomes, core threshold concepts through to course design, content, pedagogy and assessment. This speaks to holistic practice of conceptualisation that is encouraged within Critical Indigenous Studies and it is hoped that this examination illuminates some ways to pursue the further development of critical indigenous thought into programmes. University and other market forces can change the way degrees and disciplines go ahead and, in 2018, the University of Newcastle enacted structural change within the Wollotuka Institute. We will see what happens to the development of the values and strategies outlined in this paper and whilst the first offering for the degree discussed in this paper was planned for 2019 we are yet to see how structural and philosophical changes in the Institute will play out.

**Conflict of interest.** This work is based in my place of employment reflecting on a process we went through over the last 6–8 years. I have recently returned from an Australia-American Fulbright Post-doctoral Scholarship for 10 months at UCLA.

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Stephanie Gilbert has recently returned from a post-doctoral Fulbright Scholarship at the American Indian Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, exploring body memory, dysphoria and the possibility of the inheritance of memory in our epigenetics. Dr Gilbert writes from within the Aboriginal and Stolen Generation communities. She is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Newcastle.