

# Teacher Education, Aboriginal Studies and the New National Curriculum

Clair Andersen

*Riawunna Centre, University of Tasmania, Australia*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian schools continue to have poor education and health outcomes, and the introduction of a new national curriculum may assist in redressing this situation. This curriculum emphasises recommendations which have been circulating in the sector over many years, to require teacher education institutions to provide their students with an understanding of past and contemporary experiences of Indigenous Australians, as well as the social, economic and health disadvantages that challenge Indigenous communities, and to equip them to integrate Indigenous issues into their future teaching programs. This article, while focusing on teacher education developments at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) to meet National Standards and Frameworks for preservice teachers, provides some general background, and identifies recently developed resources, including the potential for Indigenous centres within universities to assist educators.

■ **Keywords:** teacher education, Aboriginal studies, graduate attributes, cultural competence

In light of the national curriculum introduced by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2011) this article considers the inclusion of Aboriginal studies for Teacher Education students, including developments at the University of Tasmania (UTAS), to enhance graduate attributes in an endeavour to improve education and health outcomes for Indigenous Australians (IHEAC, 2008). Rather than addressing in detail the need to prepare preservice teachers for meeting the needs of Indigenous learners, as ideally this would be covered in a separate unit of study along with a specific unit for remote area teaching that would include English as second language skills, the focus here is on how we at UTAS have been attempting to develop Education students' skills to teach Aboriginal studies units and also gain the cultural understanding needed to deliver an informed and sensitive Aboriginal studies experience for their future pupils (Ah Sam & Ackland, 2005).

## Background

Throughout their primary and secondary education, students in classrooms around the nation are encouraged to learn about other countries and cultures, including the languages, histories and cultures of Japan, China, Germany, Spain, Italy, France and other countries. Meanwhile,

there has been little inclusion of the history, culture and language of the Indigenous people of Australia in primary or secondary schools (Craven, 1999). This is particularly true in Tasmanian schools; a situation which may well be related to the past lack of preparation provided to preservice teachers.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have been accepted into mainstream Western-style classrooms to gain a Western education. However, the flow of knowledge and understanding has been one way. Indigenous perspectives and world views have much to offer the Western way of thinking, but there have been few opportunities to learn of these, due to the assimilationist nature of schooling (Harris & Malin, 1994). With the exception of bilingual programs in some rural and remote areas, Indigenous content is generally lacking in Australian classrooms; changing this will assist in enhancing the education of all students, in addition to increasing the sense of wellbeing for Indigenous students (Malin & Maidment, 2003).

Both Nakata (2002) and Ford (2005) have indicated that the cultural interface, or cultural domain, between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students within

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ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Clair Andersen, Riawunna Centre, University of Tasmania, Private Bag 6, Hobart TAS 7001, Australia. Email: Clair.Andersen@utas.edu.au

classrooms provides both challenges and opportunities. Including Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum promotes its visibility and helps to raise the Indigenous students' self-esteem and interest in schooling. However, the inclusion of Indigenous topics of study is more powerful if they emerge from the individual student's interest to provide a stimulus for further learning and academic skill development (Nakata).

Ford (2005) informs us that remote schools can become sites for a 'new generation of people working together in partnership in a new era towards a future that is unknown, but one that has improved outcomes for Tyikim [Indigenous] knowledge interests', in order to create new ideas and knowledge beyond the 'old ideas that have previously occupied and colonised this central space' (Ford, p. 11). However, Indigenous students also need to be supported to operate 'both ways', to use 'Indigenous ways ("traditional forms and ways of knowing, or the residue of these")', as well as non-Indigenous ("Western") ways' (Nakata, 2002, p. 9), so they are safe and secure in both domains (Sarra, 2003).

Despite the opportunity for rich, shared learning experiences, research continues to show us that Indigenous students in Australia do not enjoy equal educational outcomes with other Australians, as evident in reports by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2007, 2010) reports. From Cape York to the Kimberley, in Central Australia and in Western New South Wales the lack of education among Indigenous children stands in marked contrast to the high literacy of other Australian children. We need to prepare our student teachers to address this challenge, and the new national curriculum, along with the agreed *The National Framework for Professional Standards for Teaching* (MCEETYA, 2003), has provided the impetus to begin to do this at UTAS in 2011, with the introduction of a core unit of study in Aboriginal studies for all education students.

## The Current Situation

For the students in our schools and the Indigenous peoples of Australia, including Indigenous culture and history as a significant part of learning in the educational curriculum of Australia, has been neglected. Only recently have historians and school texts begun to present the shared Indigenous and non-Indigenous history of Australia (Reynolds & Dennet, 2002). Learning about the heritage of this country — the place we call home — should be vitally important for all students. If this is so, then it is the responsibility of every school within Australia to actively promote the recognition that Indigenous Australians deserve (Craven, 1999; Craven, Halse, & Marsh, 2005).

Some state and territory departments of education have played an active role in creating resources to support the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives within teaching programs (Education Department of South Australia, 1992).

However, generally there has been a gap in the preparation of our graduate teachers to undertake this important work. Within Tasmania this has been largely due to the optional or elective nature of the courses or units on offer within the education degree programs, and the reluctance of students to undertake them as evidenced in the work of O'Dowd (2010) and Phillips (2011).

## What Teacher Education Courses Need

In order to meet new teacher registration criteria and to address changes in the Australian national curriculum, universities, including UTAS, are developing new teacher education units to address professional development requirements for current teachers locally, nationally and in the South Pacific region. To meet the new regulations in teacher education, courses must include a core unit of study which:

- provides teachers with an understanding of past and contemporary experiences of Indigenous Australians
- examines Indigenous Australian history and the social, economic and health disadvantages that challenge Indigenous communities
- assists education students in expanding their understanding of Indigenous cultures and gaining the knowledge to provide culturally appropriate programs to students in schools.

It should also assist preservice teachers in developing an awareness of how to integrate Indigenous issues into their teaching programs (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2008).

## The Tasmanian Context

Within Tasmanian state schools there has been little or no teaching of Aboriginal studies or inclusion of Indigenous perspectives, which is in marked contrast to New South Wales where it has been mandatory for some time in public schools to implement that state's Department of Education and Training (DET) Aboriginal Education and Training Policy (2008), which requires that Aboriginal perspectives are provided in all key learning areas. This is now a requirement in all states for higher education institutions involved in teacher education training in order to meet the new national curriculum guidelines, and has been an important driver for change at UTAS.

While this curriculum does not have any mandate to teacher education it does have a mandate to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the curriculum, and as such has been a significant factor in facilitating change within teacher education at UTAS.

With the experience of delivering six elective summer school units for more than 300 education students who have come through a schooling system that has provided them with little prior knowledge of Indigenous history or culture, we have found that our teacher education unit of study needs to focus on contemporary issues in

Indigenous Education, as well as develop students' understanding of the historical backgrounds of Indigenous Australians and how these experiences have impacted upon their schooling. The unit needs to enable students to build on their knowledge of content and the syllabus requirement and develop skills in applying cross-disciplinary curriculum content, values and perspectives, especially global and civics and citizenship education. It must also address the Quality Teaching framework, the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, the Global Education Statement and the National Statement for Engaging Australian Students with Asia.

It is especially important that the unit develops skills and knowledge that will enable future teachers to address the many issues that face Indigenous pupils in the schooling environment; this aspect has been particularly challenging due to the limited time available in a semester. Our focus has been on the delivery of Aboriginal studies in primary or secondary education, and preparing students through lectures and workshops to deliver a unit of work or sequence of learning during their practicum placement. Students also needed to be guided on the ways of undertaking consultation with Aboriginal communities, organisations and individuals, as many have had little or no contact with Indigenous people. Also as students are initially resistant to undertaking a core or compulsory unit of Aboriginal studies (Phillips, 2011) the use of a reflective journal has been introduced to provide opportunities for the students to express their shifts in resistance as they progress through the study material.

### **An Example: Aboriginal Studies for Education Students at UTAS**

A third year unit has been developed in response to state and national imperatives to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, histories, cultures and perspectives within standard school curricula. It attempts to assist settler-Australians to 'understand and acknowledge the value of Indigenous cultures and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' (MCEETYA, 2008). It is also part of the attempt to better engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schooling.

An integral element of the unit is the provision of an online reflective journal. Journals are recognised for facilitating reflection, and as an important component of experiential education (Anderson, 1993; Bennion & Olsen, 2002). The journal is provided for students' personal use, to record personal observations and thoughts. It is included to help students to track their own development in a unit of study potentially full of new and challenging issues. Their observations are expected to foster the development of insights as they complete assessment tasks in subsequent parts of the unit. It has enabled students to re-

flect on their values, attitudes and the opportunities they have been able to access on their educational pathway. The journal activities have assisted students to enhance reflection, facilitate critical thought, write focused arguments, and express feelings regarding their educational experiences. It has been a critical tool in assisting the students to understand the need for the decolonisation of learning.

Classes are delivered in seminar mode, with students responding to a range of supplied material, including articles, videos and curriculum resources with strong Indigenous voices. We try to foster an open learning environment where students will feel comfortable to ask difficult and challenging questions in order to enhance their understanding of Indigenous issues and become aware of the need for social justice and empowerment of Indigenous Australians as highlighted by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council funded project 'Exploring Problem-Based Learning pedagogy as transformative education in Indigenous Australian studies' (see Mackinlay and Barney in this volume).

On completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. critically reflect on their journey of learning about the historical and contemporary issues that impact on Aboriginal education
2. demonstrate knowledge of the variable contexts of Aboriginal education
3. identify effective teaching and learning approaches for Aboriginal learners in various contexts; and
4. determine appropriate strategies, models and resources in planning for and teaching Aboriginal studies.

The unit consists of three modules. The first introduces precolonial, colonial and contemporary Aboriginal societies and cultures. This knowledge is basic to culturally competent and effective teaching of Aboriginal curriculum and Aboriginal students. The second outlines key elements of the logic of Aboriginal studies curricula, which has been to provide an inclusive and 'culturally appropriate' education; and the third introduces refinements to Aboriginal studies that explicitly address the impacts of cultural intersection, personal interaction and marginalising social forces.

Assessment for the unit requires education students to develop a comprehensive unit of work or learning sequence that incorporates components of Aboriginal studies. The following feedback from a student, who completed the unit in the 2011 summer school, is reflective of similar comments from many other students who have taken the unit:

*I like the content the most because it provided me with a greater understanding of Aboriginal studies and background. This unit was full of readings and at times overwhelming but the growth I have gained is unmentionable. The delivery and organisation of the weekly readings, tasks and requirements was fabulous. The best unit I have completed thus far. Well done and well planned.*

Through undertaking such units of study, education students have the opportunity to deepen their understanding of contemporary and traditional Indigenous Australian cultures and histories and gain an appreciation of how these affect learning; and also become aware of recommended ways for engaging with Indigenous students, educators and communities. However, despite good preparation, Education graduates will face many challenges and will require ongoing support and development opportunities, which can be gained through professional bodies, seminars, conferences and further studies as well as online networks like the outcome of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) funded 'Exploring Problem-Based Learning Pedagogy as Transformative Education in Indigenous Australian Studies' project ([www.teaching4change.edu.au](http://www.teaching4change.edu.au)) and Embedding Indigenous Perspectives (<http://www.thelearningfederation.edu.au/default.asp>).

## A National Curriculum

The idea of a national curriculum has been contested with arguments for and against it; advocates have stressed consistency and comparability issues between the states and territories with reference to education outcomes and retention rates, while those opposed, question whether a national curriculum will make any difference to outcomes and retention rates in Australian schools and emphasise the need to reconceptualise, integrate and streamline the core curriculum (Henderson, 2011). According to Reid (2009), the rationale provided for the national curriculum is limited and fails to address the key question: 'What is it about Australia in a globalising world that makes a national curriculum so important?' (Reid, p. 7). As Kennedy (2009) says, these debates about a national curriculum run deep and are not 'merely academic — they are debates about a nation's soul. About its values. About its beliefs' (Kennedy, 2009, p. 6).

As there has been considerable debate and concern around the history component of the national curriculum both in the press (Rout, 2011) and online (NSDC, 2012), I would like to draw attention to the section dealing with the teaching of Australian history from kindergarten to year 10. The broad areas of Australian history include: a strong focus on local, community and regional history; a general history of Australia from the arrival of Europeans to 1901; and a focus on Australian history since Federation for year 10.

In addition to these broad themes, it is intended to include Aboriginal perspectives and culture as an important part of the overall national curriculum. The program is ambitious as it also includes the teaching of historiography, research and analysis of sources. Will our teachers be able and ready to do this and will there time to embed Indigenous perspectives adequately and responsibly? To do so will require familiarity with local resource materi-

als as well as knowledge of, in our case, the Tasmanian archives. Who can assist with this work which will require considerable time and resources to progress?

## A Role for Indigenous Centres

Indigenous centres and institutes within universities, such as the Riawunna Centre at UTAS, are well placed to assist in developing a core unit for education students in order to prepare them for the demands of this new curriculum. Most Indigenous centres and institutes have experienced Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff with considerable expertise in Aboriginal studies generally, as well as Anthropology, Education and History, to contribute to their university's teacher education program. Many are already involved in the delivery of both elective and core units for preservice teachers and could also deliver units for inservice teachers.

As the development of effective educational and health care delivery to Indigenous Australians is currently one of the underpinning strategies to improve Indigenous health outcomes, UTAS has been working to address this imperative in the preparation of both education and health graduates. The unit of study outlined above has been developed to prepare UTAS teacher education graduates to be culturally competent in the classroom, and to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders perspectives within their teaching. For further details on why Indigenous cultural competence is a desirable graduate attribute and how a cultural competency framework was implemented at UTAS to facilitate the graduation of culturally competent students (see Andersen, 2012). As well as preparing teachers well, UTAS has also focused on preparing culturally competent health professionals, as outlined in Andersen (2009). This work at UTAS has been undertaken jointly with the Riawunna Centre and the respective schools and faculties, to facilitate consistent experiences for students.

The need for all professionals to become better informed about Indigenous issues is recognised and acknowledged in key reports (AIHW, 2008; Commonwealth Government, 1991). Recommendation 8a states: 'That State and Territory Governments ensure that primary and secondary school curricula include substantial compulsory modules on history and the continuing effects of forcible removal' (Commonwealth Government), which have significantly impacted on Indigenous health. As the National Mental Health Policy (Australian Government, 2008) recognises certain minority groups within Australian society, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, are at increased risk of mental health problems and mental illness, hence development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health Policy (Australian Government, 1995). This policy aims to promote the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people in their communities and where possible prevent the development of mental health problems and mental disorders.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health Policy recognises that mental health problems and disorders must also encompass a recognition of the historical and socio-political context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health, including the impact of colonisation; trauma, loss, and grief from separation of families and children; the taking away of land; the loss of culture and identity; and the general impact of social inequity, stigma, racism, and ongoing losses; all of which can be addressed within Aboriginal studies units for education and health undergraduates.

## Conclusion

It is implementation of these policies and the actions and outcomes which flow from a national curriculum framework that will ultimately make the difference, and the Indigenous centres within universities are well placed to progress these by encouraging collaboration and common understandings between education and health professionals.

A well-trained workforce will help to secure and sustain education and health improvements for Indigenous communities, and it is critically important that our universities commit to providing more inclusive education for our future graduates so that we can move towards greater understanding by all. This can only be achieved with the involvement of Indigenous people (IHEAC, 2011) and through development of appropriate teaching and learning resources.

Having worked in this field for more than 20 years with limited resources to prepare student teachers as our future leaders in Indigenous education, some new resources listed in Appendix are welcome additions to enhance the teaching and learning experience within universities, and will provide new teachers with a basic tool kit or dilly bag of accessible and relevant information to support Indigenous students and for richer learning about Indigenous Australia in their classrooms.

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## Appendix

1. The Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) curriculum renewal project ([www.teaching4change.edu.au](http://www.teaching4change.edu.au)) explores ways in which teaching and learning in Indigenous Australian studies can transform tertiary education as a pathway to social justice and empowerment for Indigenous peoples. As discussed by Mackinlay and Barney in the introduction to this volume, this website has practical resources for Indigenous Australian studies, including exemplars with sample scenarios, and a guide to successful delivery at tertiary level, as well as literature and useful web links. The name 'Teaching4Change' represents the four levels of education, early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary, and future projects will explore and share approaches used. As the History curriculum in schools prep to year 12 is challenging and will require ongoing work to ensure the inclusion of Indigenous histories, this website will continue to be an important resource.
2. *Two Way Learning And Teaching: Toward Culturally Reflective, Inclusive and Relevant Education* (Milgate, Purdie, & Bell, 2011) reminds us that educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can be improved only when the process is informed by Indigenous culture, and teaching and learning become part of an equal and genuine cultural exchange. Such is the central tenet that underpins this thought-provoking, sometimes confronting, yet ultimately optimistic, publication. A media release about this resource, can be found at ACER Interactive (<http://interactive.acer.edu.au/index.php/2011/07/acer-is-proud-to-announce-the-release-of-two-way-teaching-learning-toward-culturally-reflective-and-relevant-education/>).
3. *Teaching and Learning in Aboriginal Education* (Harrison, 2011) helps preservice teachers prepare themselves for the challenges and joys of teaching Aboriginal students in urban, remote and rural primary and secondary schools. This book balances the practical, the personal and the theoretical to convey the richness of diversity that is found within Australian classrooms. Features focus on building students' confidence and understanding of the different classrooms, cultural environments and communities they will be teaching in, including:

- issues that future teachers may encounter when teaching children in urban, rural and remote primary and secondary schools
  - skills to incorporate the new requirements of the national curriculum to include Aboriginal perspectives into all aspects of teaching
  - working with gifted and talented Aboriginal children to ensure that they don't become invisible underachievers
  - how to connect mathematics in the classroom with the life experiences of mathematics in the everyday life of Aboriginal students
  - an extensive collection of resources, including documentaries, journals, articles and websites.
4. Education Services Australia (ESA, 2012; formerly Curriculum Corporation) has developed a new website to support teachers, titled 'Embedding Indigenous Perspectives', in their classroom practice. It is a restricted site for registered teachers only and accessible through the Learning Federation at <http://www.thelearningfederation.edu.au/default.asp>
5. Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2011) has developed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures priority events in conjunction with the ACARA cross-curriculum priority online survey (<http://consultation.australiancurriculum.edu.au>). These consultation forums focusing on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures priority within the Australian Curriculum were facilitated by a national project officer, and the cross-curriculum priorities can be found on the Australian Curriculum website at <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/CrossCurriculumPriorities>.

### About the Author

Clair Andersen's people come from the Gulf country in the Northern Territory where she has Yanyuwa and Gunggalida clan connections. She began her education in Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory before moving to Tasmania to complete high school and a Bachelor of Education at the University of Tasmania (UTAS). Currently she is Director of the Riawunna Centre at UTAS and her research interests are in improving education and training pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and the development of appropriate learning resources. More recently the focus of her work has been the inclusion of Indigenous Australian content within teaching programs at UTAS.