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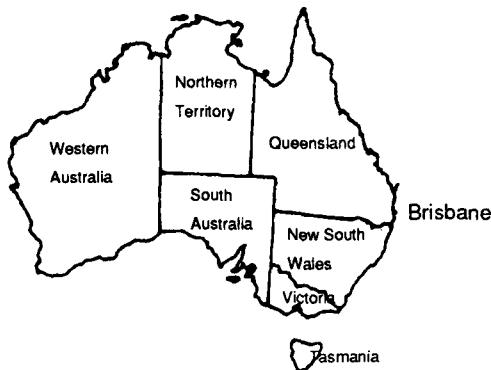
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Section C: Research

Indigenous Australian Perspectives in Teaching at The University of Queensland

Jo Lampert

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit
The University of Queensland*



Introduction

The goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP), the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the broader implications of the High Court's Native Title decision place considerable pressure on the higher education system to move rapidly to achieve equity in access, participation and outcomes for Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians.

In 1993, Indigenous Australian students accounted for only 1% of national higher education enrolments (Bin-Sallik, 1993: 8). This figure had not changed by 1994, when the University of Queensland's *Equity Plan 1995-99* reported that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people are under-represented in the University's population (0.7% in 1994) in relation to the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people in the wider community (2.4% for Queensland, 1991 census). A recent report from Flinders University on the development and testing of indicators to assess universities' performance in setting and meeting equity targets found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Island students, and socio-economically disadvantaged students are still the most significantly under-represented groups, and are less successful than other Priority Equity Groups (Martin cited in *A Fair Chance*, 1995: 4).

This under-representation of Indigenous Australian students is of concern to Indigenous Australian people, non-Indigenous Australian people who care about issues of equity and justice, and to institutions subjected to growing pressure to increase their enrolments of Equity Target Groups. Goal 2 of the University of Queensland's *Strategic Plan 1992-1996* is to 'provide improved educational opportunities for minority and disadvantaged groups' and aims by 1996 to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students enrolling by 75%.

The Study¹

The research was designed to gauge the representation of Indigenous Australian perspectives across the University, discover where Indigenous Australian issues are currently being taught formally and informally in the curriculum, and provide practical recommendations for the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island world views and intellectual traditions in courses, wherever applicable. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit was also interested in looking at how teaching staff perceived that the needs of Indigenous Australian students were being met at the University. It was felt that what was being taught about Indigenous Australians at the University went hand-in-hand with issues of retention and success at university.

¹ This paper is based on a research project funded by a Department of Education, Employment and Training National Priority (Reserve) Fund grant, to be published in March 1996.

For the purposes of this survey, the population to be surveyed was defined as all teaching staff at the University of Queensland. At the conception of this research, the University employed a total of 1236.55 teaching staff (The University of Queensland Statistics, 1994: 98).

It was decided to conduct in-depth interviews with 20% of the total teaching staff at the University. The six academic resource groups at the University of Queensland were used to break the sample population into sub-samples. The academic resource groups are: Biological Sciences, Gatton College, Health Sciences, Humanities, Physical Sciences and Engineering and Social Sciences. These six resource groups were then divided according to the number of departments in each. In this way, each resource group was represented equitably in the sample, according to its proportion of departments out of the total 67 departments in the University.

Two instruments were used in this investigation: a set of interview questions to be asked during the interviews, and a series of questions to be applied to course handbooks sent in by the departments.

Where suitable, data from both the interviews and from the handbook content analysis were entered onto SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences).

Significant Findings

The results of this research are being published in two volumes. Volume One gives information on the results of the research. It presents a literature review, discusses the results of the survey of academic staff at the University of Queensland, a content analysis of Course Outlines, and gives a list of recommendations. Volume Two gives practical suggestions to lecturers who wish to incorporate Indigenous Australian content into their subjects.

Very briefly, these are some results of this research:

- One hundred and thirty-six lecturers (54.2%) interviewed believe that teaching Indigenous Australian studies is at least somewhat important to the subjects they teach. The main reason is that it is directly relevant to the course. A typical comment from a lecturer who felt positively about

including Indigenous Australian content was, 'It's not only interesting but important. Indigenous Australian people are not simply an ethnic minority ... other Australians need to come to terms with their relationship to them', although some lecturers made comments like 'I support what you're doing, but can't see how my area could offer an Aboriginal perspective'. This last kind of comment was expressed particularly by lecturers in the Sciences.

- Eighty-two lecturers (33.6% of the sample) identify themselves as teaching some Indigenous Australian content in their subjects. Another 34 (13.9%) may refer to Indigenous Australian content on occasion.
- The difficulties of those who teach Indigenous Australian material include the sensitive nature of the material, lack of resources, time and workload constraints, lack of knowledge, lack of right to teach the material and difficulties in knowing how to teach the content. Some lecturers said things like, 'trying to put ATSI content into courses is indulgent and it has very little impact on anyone who isn't already sympathetic. It's a waste of time', while others were 'hesitant to tackle something that is so sensitive'. A typical concern was expressed by the lecturer who said 'We have enough trouble cramming things in, to be blunt'.
- Two hundred and eighteen (87%) of those interviewed say it is at least somewhat important to be teaching Indigenous Australian studies at the University. The majority of respondents say it is most important to include it where it is related to course content.
- Forty-five (44.6%) of the 101 lecturers who currently teach some Indigenous Australian content say that their non-Indigenous students respond positively to the material. In other cases there may be a mixed reaction. Of the 60 lecturers who teach Indigenous Australian content and have Indigenous Australians in their classes, 25 (41.7%) say these students always respond positively to the content.
- One hundred and four lecturers (41.4%) say there is such a thing as an Indigenous Australian perspective in their field. The most common ways these are addressed in class are through discussion, through bringing in Indigenous Australian guest

lecturers, and through presenting Indigenous Australian authored text.

- One hundred and forty-seven lecturers (59%) are aware of having had Indigenous Australian students in their classes at some time. Some valued the Indigenous Australian perspectives they had brought to the classes.
- The major difficulties Indigenous Australian students are identified as having include such things as deadlines and schedules, shyness, difficulty with course content, 'cultural' difficulties and problems with literacy, numeracy and academic skills. 'My feeling is a lot don't go beyond first year, probably because of the structure of the course. For someone from a minority group, it can be impossible', was an example of the kind of opinion expressed. A number of lecturers asked the question, 'Why weren't Aboriginal students prepared in high school for university?'
- Lecturers attempt to assist their Indigenous Australian students by giving personal support, helping students get tuition and being flexible in assignments. Twenty-four per cent of those interviewed said they had no strategies to support Indigenous Australian students.
- When looking for resources on Indigenous Australian issues, lecturers may look first for information which relates to course content, is written by Indigenous Australians or is intellectually challenging.
- A significant number of lecturers do not know where to find resources.
- The most pressing concern for lecturers is to get more information on meeting the needs of their Indigenous Australian students. Some expressed an interest in cross-cultural workshops. Other lecturers expressed interest in getting updated information on health issues, land management and land rights issues as they relate to Indigenous Australians.
- Lecturers would like access to directories of Indigenous Australian materials and to a resource library on related issues. They also state that it would be useful to develop new research projects,

new relevant curriculum and multi-media resources.

- Lecturers would like help from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit in recruiting Indigenous Australian students, organising guest speakers and field trips and supporting current students. Many said they would like an introduction to the Unit.
- Reasons lecturers believe there have not been many Indigenous Australian students in their departments, include the students' lack of prerequisites or background knowledge, the lack of relevance of the course to Indigenous Australian communities and high entry requirements. Some lecturers felt their departments were not supportive of Indigenous Australians.

Discussion

Some lecturers felt there was no point in including Indigenous Australian content in their lectures unless there were Indigenous Australian students in their classes. However, the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island knowledge not only helps Indigenous Australians relate to course content, but expands the world view of non-Indigenous Australian students. The attitude also reflects a classic 'Catch 22' situation, which is complicated further by the fact that Indigenous Australian students cannot always be identified by appearance.

Many lecturers feel that there are too few Indigenous Australian students enrolling at university. The issue of enrolling and supporting Indigenous Australian students is of more pressing concern to the departments than the question of including Indigenous Australian content in classes. The issues are seen as separate by most teaching staff. However, the correlation between the presence of Indigenous Australian students in courses and the teaching of Indigenous Australian content in those courses needs more exploration.

The necessity for the inclusion of Indigenous Australian content raises complex questions. Some believe that there is the potential in any subject area to be including such content. Others feel that Indigenous Australian content is natural in some areas, but would make little sense in others. It does

seem clear, however, that there are many areas at the University of Queensland where Indigenous Australian issues could be taught, though they are not at present, and in other fields Indigenous Australian knowledge cannot easily be included. For example, physics is based on Western scientific principles. Other explanations of the nature of the world may exist, but they are not, by definition, physics.

Lecturers were often unclear about Indigenous Australian perspectives, and while many believed that there was such a thing in principle, they were unable to see how it applied to their own field. The idea of Indigenous Australian perspectives needs to be raised amongst lecturers, who may come to acknowledge that the existence of Indigenous Australian perspectives is relevant to their own disciplines.

It is significant that much of what is being taught in relation to Indigenous Australian people does not reflect Indigenous Australian perspectives. This was, not so long ago, the situation with women's issues, offered from a male perspective. The situation demands the kind of debate that has occurred around gender and ownership of information. Indigenous Australian people should be presenting their own information wherever possible (e.g. through the use of Indigenous Australian guest lecturers).

Lecturers expressed concern about the sensitivity of teaching about Indigenous Australian material in the classroom. Some feel restricted in what they can and cannot say. These concerns are significant, and suggest that lecturers are going to have to become better informed about current attitudes and protocol, and more confident about the best and most appropriate ways to teach things. They will need to consult more often with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit and Indigenous Australian communities, which can provide answers to some of these concerns.

There was generally a great deal of support and good will towards the teaching of Indigenous Australian content at the University, although it is of some concern that lecturers tend not to see its inclusion as their responsibility. People claim to feel Indigenous Australian studies should be taught at the University, but sometimes do not see that responsibility as lying within their own department or with themselves. Departments at the University and individual lecturers need to initiate change, with support from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit.

When staff who are involved in Indigenous Australian issues leave the University, they are almost never replaced by people with similar interests. This raises questions about the University's on-going interest in Indigenous Australian studies. Without a structural and institutionalised method of ensuring continuity, the teaching of Indigenous Australian Studies and the University's involvement in research will continue to depend on the vagaries of individual interest.

Responses to Indigenous Australian content

Some lecturers did not know how Indigenous Australian students felt about material taught in class. This is a matter of some concern, and before new curriculum is developed it would be prudent to get feedback from Indigenous Australian students. Although lecturers are concerned with not wanting to single out Indigenous Australian students, if they do not do so the opinions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students will not be heard.

There was recognition that not all Indigenous Australian students will think alike or have the same skills or difficulties. The diversity of Indigenous Australian opinions benefits the class, and for the most part, recognition of diversity of opinion indicates that the lecturer is attending to the range of responses being offered by Indigenous Australian students. This might be an area where teaching staff could be trained to respond more constructively, sensitively, and listen more closely to their Indigenous Australian students' responses. Lecturers also need to think about the reasons Indigenous Australian students seem especially interested in topics concerning themselves and their people.

Increasing the enrolment of Indigenous Australian students at The University of Queensland

The relatively high proportion of respondents who could not imagine why there had been few Indigenous Australian students in their courses, would indicate that the time is ripe to take the issue seriously, and take the opportunity to examine the ways in which the University could be attracting and encouraging Indigenous Australian students. The impression that schools are ill preparing Indigenous Australian students for university is an issue that needs to be acknowledged and addressed.

Meeting the needs of Indigenous Australian students

The question of whether Indigenous Australian students should be identified leaves room for increased debate. More dialogue would have to occur about this issue, with Indigenous Australians offering their views. The risks of identifying all Indigenous Australian students (e.g. making assumptions about students' potential based solely on race) may make that suggestion undesirable. Lecturers need to ask themselves why they want the information, and in what ways it would benefit themselves and their students. If it is a matter of offering more support, other methods could be found for identifying students with academic needs, or to help the students themselves become more comfortable asking for assistance.

It was apparent that it came more easily to lecturers to speak about the needs or weaknesses of Indigenous Australian students than to think about positive ways those students were contributing to classes. This may be an issue for consideration. Nonetheless, the difficulties Indigenous Australian students were identified as having raise questions about the support currently being offered to students, particularly those who enrol in the University under the alternative entrance scheme. It is the department's responsibility, along with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, to support the students they accept into their program, and departments will have to increase their support systems in order to do this effectively.

Some specific student needs were identified by lecturers. If indeed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students are uncomfortable with institutional practices (e.g. timetabling), attention needs to be paid to this, either in terms of preparing Indigenous Australian students more adequately, providing a more culturally appropriate environment, or both. If prerequisite knowledge or academic and study skills are lacking, students who are accepted into courses need to be given the opportunity to gain those skills early in the course. How and by whom this should be done needs more discussion.

Conclusion

This is a brief summary of Volume 1 of the report on this research. In it, recommendations are made to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, to departments at the University of Queensland, and to the administration of the University to address the concerns identified.

Volume 2 of the report makes practical suggestions to lecturers who wish to incorporate Indigenous Australian content and perspectives into their courses.

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Jo Lampert, MEd is a Senior Researcher with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at the University of Queensland. □

