

# Teachers, Time, Staff and Money: Committing to Community Consultation in High Schools

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State and Federal education departments have increasingly recognised the importance of community consultation in the development of school curricula, and the requirement for teachers to consult with Indigenous communities is explicit in many curriculum documents. This article reports the findings of research into how teachers of senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies are engaging with consultation as part of their work. As Australia moves towards full implementation of a national curriculum that requires the embedding of Indigenous perspectives across all subjects, an understanding of how teachers are currently experiencing community consultation is particularly important.

■ **Keywords:** consultation, community, time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

This article reports on the experiences of four Queensland-based teachers of senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies who are engaging in consultation with Indigenous community members. Queensland and Federal education departments have recognised the importance of community consultation in the development of school curricula, and the requirement for teachers to consult with Indigenous communities is now explicit in many curriculum documents. Studies conducted across multiple disciplines have highlighted the need for Indigenous communities to be heavily involved in the development of programs and services (Bauman, 2007; Bond, 2010; Hendricks, Cope, & Harris, 2008; Schwab & Sutherland, 2001). These reports have also reinforced the considerable time required for the establishment of community relationships. Protocol guidelines inform teachers and other school staff that a significant investment of time is needed to achieve positive results (see, e.g., Board of Studies NSW, 2008; Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Body [QIECB], 2008; Queensland Studies Authority [QSA], 2010). Research conducted into the workload of teachers, however, suggests that their capacity to engage in activities such as consultation is diminishing (Gardner & Williamson, 2006; Howe, 2006; Timms, Graham, & Cottrell, 2007; Queensland Industrial Relations Commission [QIRC], 2009).

The participants in this study explained that they value community consultation, and have attempted to engage in the process of consultation. Several factors that enable

this process were recounted by participants, such as the assistance of Community Education Counsellors (CECs) and members of groups or organisations that have a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and perspectives. Elements of participant-teachers' work that have impeded successful implementation of consultative practices include restrictive timetabling, workload, and a lack of funding for community-based projects. Overall, the participants' perceptions about levels of institutional support for community consultation were generally low, with some organisations considered to be more committed to the process than others. Each participant offered partial solutions to problems that they identified, often suggesting that teachers be provided with time specifically for the development of consultative relationships with local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community members. The findings of this study are relevant to all teachers in Australia, not only those who teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, particularly as schools transition to a national curriculum, one that requires the embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures throughout all subjects.

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## Background

The research project that informs this article began while I was working as a teacher of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, a senior Authority high school subject. I needed to engage in consultation for its own sake and because it was a syllabus requirement. There were many times, however, when I did not feel sufficiently supported to do these things as part of my job. In a workplace that appeared to consider the core work of a teacher to be the planning of lessons and units, teaching of classes, writing and marking of assignments, attending staff meetings, communication with parents about achievement and behaviour, and completion of paperwork, it was difficult to find the time to consult with community as it was often viewed as an extra-curricular activity (Schwab & Sutherland, 2001). It was difficult to meet with community members within school hours as I had three and a half hours of non-contact time per week, during which I was required to plan lessons, mark assignments and other immediately required tasks. My postgraduate studies provided an opportunity to speak with other teachers of the subject and find out what they were experiencing when engaging in this part of their work.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies was introduced into eight Queensland schools in 1996 and had a total enrolment of 76 students. The trial and subsequent syllabuses were developed by the Queensland Studies Authority, a statutory body of the Queensland government that, among other duties, creates and accredits syllabuses, and implements quality assurance measures. The subject was in 23 schools as of 2009, with 293 students enrolled in Years 11 and 12 (QSA, 2009b). A goal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies is to enable students to develop an understanding of, and respect for, the diverse Indigenous cultures of Australia, and a knowledge of the varied histories of Indigenous Australia (QSA, 2009a). Current and previous syllabuses have required staff involved in the subject to engage in extensive and ongoing consultation with local Indigenous community members (QSA, 2001; QSA, 2009a). The time required to build positive relationships with communities is reiterated throughout the syllabus document; teachers and principals are advised that they should consult with communities before the course of study is developed, and continue to do so for the life of the subject.

The authors of the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies syllabus (QSA, 2009a) highlight several core expectations of teachers and students of the course. Teachers are directed to develop the curriculum in conjunction with Indigenous community members and to ensure that this relationship is maintained. The syllabus is designed to be fairly flexible, enabling a program to be adapted to student, school, and community needs. It is expected that students will learn about topics previously ignored by past syllabuses, and that this learning will

take place within pedagogical spaces that are grounded in Indigenous epistemologies. The impacts of Eurocentric, colonial education on the knowledge of teachers are recognised and professional development is recommended for all school staff in order to provide students with a supportive environment in which to conduct their studies. The syllabus and other supporting documents encourage extensive consultation but provide little advice about how this might be effectively coordinated within a busy teacher timetable.

The current syllabus for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies asserts that 'time is needed to develop a relationship between the school, the teacher and representatives of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community to bring the most satisfying outcomes' (QSA, 2009a, p. 23) and that 'consultation may take quite a long time' (QSA, 2009a, p. 24). In order to assist teachers to build relationships with local Indigenous communities the QSA has published a flowchart that makes suggestions about how to go about the complex business of consultation. The issue of time, however, is not one that is referred to. One sentence of a document that offers school administration teams advice about embedding Indigenous perspectives mentions the potential challenge of time requirements; the Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA, 2006) acknowledges that 'timetable constraints can often impede the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives within the school environment' (p. 17).

## Methods

For many years educational research was the domain of academics working within positivist and post-positivist frameworks (Somekh, 2005). These paradigms provide scientific methods and techniques with which researchers collect and analyse data. Their capacity to enable participants to tell their stories, however, is obviously limited. Qualitative methods are much more relevant to this study, which seeks to offer an insight into the lived experiences of teachers. Extended quotes from interviews are included in this article in order to provide readers with a clearer understanding of the intentions of the interviewed teachers.

Before potential participants were invited to take part in the research project, permission was first sought from Education Queensland (EQ), the education portfolio of the Department of Education, Training and Employment, and the employer of Queensland state school teachers. In order to gain a broad understanding of the consultative experiences of teachers, the principals of all Queensland state schools that offer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies were contacted and their permission sought to contact the teacher of the subject. Teachers were invited to participate on receipt of the principal's consent.

Teacher-participants completed online, identified surveys which primarily consisted of open-ended questions

that encouraged respondents to describe their experiences with consultation. All participating teachers were then invited to take part in more in-depth telephone interviews. The coding of interview data was a continuous process used to identify themes and investigate relationships between key concepts. The construction of a concordance and the identification of frequently used words helped me to 'discover themes in texts' (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 269). Analysis occurred upon receipt of each survey and after each interview.

## Parameters of the Study

In 2010 there were 13 teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Queensland state high schools. All principals of state high schools that offer the subject were contacted and permission sought to invite the teacher to participate in the study. Several principals did not respond to emails or phone calls, and others withheld permission to contact teachers. Of those teachers invited to participate, seven returned signed consent forms, but only four completed the survey and participated in interviews. Although the total number of participants is small, data were collected from almost a third of the pool of possible contributors.

## Major Findings

The four teachers who participated in the study have each been teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies for between 1 and 10 years. They are located in a range of locations throughout Queensland, two in northern Queensland, and two in southern schools. Half of the teacher-participants work in remote communities with populations of over 1000 residents, and the other two are in regional cities with populations in excess of 100,000 each. Their connections with their local community are as diverse as the length of time they have been teaching the subject; several teachers have spent many years in their current town, while one teacher had only recently moved to the area.

Teacher participants were asked to share their stories about their involvement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and their involvement with community consultation. Participants were asked to explain their interpretation of 'community consultation' and then prompted to speak about their feelings regarding the value of consultation. The work involved in the consultation process was recounted and followed up by reflections on the factors that enable consultation and those that impede it, including perceptions about institutional support for the process. Finally, participants were asked to share their wishes for the future in terms of an ideal situation regarding consultation between themselves and the community.

## Initial Consultative Contact

Shannon started teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies a decade ago and her initial point of contact was the school's Community Education Counsellor (CEC), with whom she had a close, previous relationship.

*I'm very spoilt in many ways . . . I was working with a woman . . . and she became my very best friend and she still is to this day my very best friend. And her sister is a really recognised Elder in this particular area and the [CEC] was quite an activist in her own right . . . So, she's quite an activist and she involved herself, and she'd tell me very, very straightforwardly if I was doing something wrong or I would ask her: 'Look, I've got to teach this subject, who can I talk to about this or this?' You know? Or: 'Can I take an excursion, I want to go to a sacred area and I don't feel it's my right to talk about it.' And she'd say: 'No, it's not your right, but I'll organise it for you. I'll set you up with this person or this person.' So she was able to help me establish links within the community.*

Brian has taught the subject for two and a half years. He inherited the subject quite unexpectedly and admits that initially his knowledge was extremely limited. He had a good relationship with the Community Education Counsellor prior to becoming the teacher of the subject and immediately sought her advice.

*I mean for me it was interesting how I got into the subject . . . I'd never taught this subject before. I'd taught in the social sciences and I had a good relationship with the CEC at the school and [another] teacher at the school. I was sitting with them on the student-free day and we were talking about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies . . . it was basically a dying subject in the school, basically being kind of left to die almost . . . I was saying to them that as a white Australian myself, even though I was a trained SOSE teacher, as a white Australian I would be scared to teach the subject. I'd be scared of saying the wrong things, I'd be scared that, you know, am I giving the right information? Do I have the right to teach the subject? And, later that day I got my new timetable and I'd been put on the subject. So I went straight to see them, and it turns out that they'd asked for me to be put on the subject, partially because they knew I would be coming to them for help, because the teacher who'd been on the subject hadn't been asking for help, hadn't been asking for advice.*

*And I think that's a big thing for teachers, we're kind of expected to be the experts, we all have these university educations and we come into schools being experts in our subjects and it's like we're scared to admit that we don't know something . . . And I think a lot of teachers are in that boat, they don't want to stand up and say 'Look, I don't know what I'm doing here'. But the fact that I'd made it quite open to them that I wasn't an expert, that I didn't know everything, I basically spent the rest of the year camping out in their offices asking for help and asking for advice and getting them to help me to design the assessment task and I think that was a pretty significant thing for me.*

Mark only recently moved to the town in which he is teaching, and started teaching the subject at the beginning of the year. Prior to commencing teaching

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies he participated in activities and lessons with the previous teacher's class and was introduced to local Elders and community members by that teacher. Mark also sought to immerse himself in the community as soon as he arrived, by frequently attending community events. He felt that this participation provided opportunities for community members to get to know him and vice versa.

Kathy is a long-term resident and teacher in her community and has taught the subject for 4 years. Living in the community for an extended period of time has enabled her to develop close professional relationships with members of that community, which have been beneficial during consultation. She has had opportunities to work with Elders and adult Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP) students as part of her work in other subjects. This has enabled stronger relationships to develop and has given her an increased knowledge of the local area and its history.

At the commencement of their work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, all the interviewed teachers drew on previously established relationships, primarily those developed within the school. Such responses suggest that beginning the consultation process prior to being appointed as a teacher of the subject is invariably beneficial.

### Teachers' Definitions of Community Consultation

The concept of consultation was defined in a general sense by respondents to the survey and revolved largely around notions of respect and protocols, and the development of relationships.

*'Community consultation' means fostering positive relationships with the local Indigenous communities, always showing respect for the local cultures and strictly observing correct protocols in all interactions. (Kathy)*

Gaining permission or guidance about how to teach particular topics within the course were other elements of consultation that were also mentioned when defining the term.

*It means working with members of the local community, especially when introducing concepts such as 'protocols' and 'the importance of acknowledgment to country' as a protocol. When I teach about things such as 'tombstone openings' and 'deaths in custody', I like to invite local Indigenous people, Elders if possible, into the classroom as there are aspects that I am not comfortable with and should not be discussing. I work closely with members of the local community . . . and consulted with them when writing the work program. (Shannon)*

The expression of respect by adhering to protocols and seeking guidance around content issues is emphasised in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies syllabus, and the reiteration of these concepts suggests that teachers are well aware of QSA expectations regarding consultation (QSA, 2009a).

### Teachers' Understandings of the Purpose of Consultation

When prompted to elaborate on their understanding of consultation by explaining their thoughts on the purpose of the practice, respect was again frequently raised as a reason for engaging in community consultation. In these responses there appears to be an expectation that consultation is a process by which teachers can learn about protocols relevant to their work which, when adhered to, enable them to further demonstrate respect for local communities.

*I think it's a respect thing as well. It's sort of like an acknowledgement of country — you know it's respecting the people, the Indigenous people of the area that you're working with. And, you know, consulting with them and asking them, especially [as] the teacher of the subject, asking them how far I can go into depth explaining certain things, like tombstones openings and things like that. Consulting with them, talking to them, and showing them you respect them, respect their ways and respect their traditions. (Shannon)*

Brian considers the process to be at the heart of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, underpinning the philosophical foundations of the course.

*I think one of the big purposes is kind of linked to why we do this subject in itself and that is the linking to reconciliation. (Brian)*

Consultation is viewed by the respondents as a mutually beneficial process whereby communities are enabled to contribute to the development of the course. Teachers' expressions of respect are viewed by community members, contributing positively to the teacher's status in that community.

### Importance of Consultation

None of the respondents consider requirements to engage in consultation as a negative element of their job, and all reported that it is a vital component of their work as teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. When asked whether consultation is something that they want to engage in, all participants responded in the affirmative.

*Oh, definitely. As a social science subject it is definitely unique in that sense. Because when we think about SOSE subjects we think of something like ancient history or modern history where everything's set out in a textbook. And there is no textbook for this subject and there can't be because we're studying living cultures and living history and the resources are the people in the communities. And they're things that are constantly evolving and changing and we're not, yes we are looking at historical documents and historical policies, but a major focus has to be the contemporary stuff, and because it's contemporary, it's constantly changing and constantly evolving and you can't just rely on going to a textbook or going to a handout booklet that someone did up five years ago and just be able to recycle that because even something that was done two years ago, there'll be a lot of new information to add to it and a whole lot of stuff*

*that now becomes obsolete. Yeah, I don't think you can survive in this subject without talking to people. (Brian)*

By and large, however, the interviewed teachers do not feel as though they are engaging in the process of consultation as much as they would like to. This is a cause of some distress for these teachers, who reported feeling bad, disappointed and frustrated. Participants were asked whether they engage in consultation enough.

*No. And I think that's really a time thing . . . It's hard to find time in schools, you know, we've got our spare periods but when we get supers as well it's often hard to book something into one of your spares because you don't necessarily know if you're going to get a supervision . . . I feel disappointed; I do feel like kicking myself at times. But then again, I have to remind myself that this is one subject, I've got six subjects I have to do. And if I put all the time into this one subject that I wanted to then I wouldn't have time for any of my other subjects. So, you know, it does disappoint me that I don't do as much as I would like to. But I just don't think there's enough time in the day to do everything that we want to do. And it's not just in this subject, it's with every subject. What can really be done about that, I don't know. I do have high expectations for myself. And I think a lot of teachers do have high expectations of themselves, but I would like to do more. (Brian)*

*Realistically, I don't think that I do it enough, I feel that there is certainly a lot more that could be done . . . [The reason for this is] scheduling conflict generally, and just the fact that it's such a busy profession, being a teacher, as well as the busy lives most of the Elders, and people that you need to get in touch with [in order] to get in touch with the Elders, lead. So it's a very hectic and chaotic lifestyle between everyone and it's very hard to do . . . I do feel pretty bad about it because sometimes there are situations where I feel it would be great to have some input from the people in the community and I don't get around to actually getting that input. (Mark)*

*I don't do enough of it because I don't have time. But I believe that I wouldn't have even done as much as I've done if I didn't have that community link myself. You know, I think it's very hard for people that don't have Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander friends, or know local people. I mean, if I was teaching down in Brisbane and had to get to know the Indigenous peoples of the Brisbane area, I don't know where I'd start. (Shannon)*

The despondency experienced by teachers due to engagement in limited consultation appears to be linked in part to possible outcomes of such a deficit. Shannon explained the potential consequences of minimal engagement.

*[Teachers] don't do it. In reality, you know, it says it in the syllabus, it says it in the work program, but in reality, it's not happening . . . Well the impact of it is that stereotypes remain the same. You don't get people coming into the school and promoting Indigenous viewpoints and you've still got these stereotypes of Aboriginal kids dropping out of school and people talk about Aboriginal people in the north here and it's always 'But they never come to school' . . . Everyone's sort of labelled under the one banner . . . it's really important that role models are promoted and that's just not being done because of lack of consultation and a lack of time.*

The teachers who were interviewed for this project all value community consultation and consider it to be part of the core business of their subject. However, none of them are engaging in it as much as they wish to. The implications of this are detrimental for the teachers themselves, who consider the negative consequences of a lack of consultation as extending into the broader community.

### The Consultation Process

The process of consultation was reported as something that is initiated by the teacher of the subject who might have an idea about a unit or excursion, and they then make contact with someone who can direct them to appropriate people and resources. This initial person is often the CEC or someone working in a similar role within the school.

*I'll go down to . . . where our CEC basically lives . . . So, if I've got a question or if I'm trying to organise an excursion, or sometimes if I'm just on a spare and just want to go and have a chat I'll just go and drop into the room and sit down and have a drink and sometimes talk a lot of rubbish and sometimes talk about stuff that's related to the kids and their needs, and sometimes talk about curriculum and through it all we'll often come up with some great ideas and it might not be that I've gone down there with a specific goal in mind but just by going down there and having a chat we end up coming up with some really good ideas. (Brian)*

*I personally think that the informal consultation is more valuable, because I do have a lot to do with — their families know who I am — if I do need to contact them about something I already have that relationship with them and they know who I am — I think that's important. Formal consultations aren't always comfortable for some, especially for the older people, so I think you just have to judge it on who you want to consult with and make sure you know the correct way of going about it. (Kathy)*

All the respondents reported participating in a combination of what Kathy referred to as 'informal' and 'formal' consultation. Each of the teachers are members of groups and organisations that provide them with regular opportunities to consult with their fellow members.

*The general way that seems to work for me is to get in touch with [the local community education group] and they are the people to talk with in [this town], with Elders, and finding out what we can do with them in a classroom setting. The other process is also through the fact that I am very well in touch with the Indigenous community here so I have a lot of other relatives of people that I can go and talk to. (Mark)*

*Generally [the previous CEC] or someone will point me to the name of a person, and so I'll ring up or get in touch with them at their workplace and let them know who I am, what I'm doing, what my role and position is and say that they've been suggested to me as an Elder, or mention what they've been suggested to me for and ask them if they wouldn't mind offering me some help, talking with me, either coming into the school or, you know, whatever I expect from them. (Shannon)*

Once again the importance of solid relationships was reinforced by all of the teachers regardless of whether their

consultation was ‘formal’, with a specified goal in mind, or ‘informal’ discussion that may or may not result in immediately applicable content or activities for the class.

### Factors Enabling Consultation

Teachers were asked to list the top five factors that have enabled them to effectively engage in consultation. On initial examination of the survey responses, only one of the top enabling factors appeared to be directly related to the school as an organisation. Brian suggested that a ‘supportive school community’ helps him to build effective consultative relationships. When asked to elaborate on this point during the interview, however, it became apparent that he was referring to the community outside the school.

*No, that’s the parents. And we’ve got some great parents and older brothers and sisters when we have, or when the CEC runs events for the Indigenous students. And it might be something after school — a bit of a celebration for something— or it might just be a ‘getting to know you’ evening or an information evening, and it’ll always be the same parents and the same older brothers and sisters that come along, and some of them are former students and they’re always keen to come and chat and catch up. Yeah, it is a good little community of families I think. (Brian)*

All other enabling factors were associated with the teachers and community members. The most significant factor that contributes to positive consultative relationships is teacher-community relationships. Several teachers identified their long-term residence in a community as beneficial to consultation as they have had the time to develop relationships, both in and outside of school. Extended association with communities enables teachers to develop relationships with a variety of community groups in multiple capacities. When exploring the elements of their practice that contribute to community relationship building, all respondents identified the role that student relationships play in this process. Two teachers maintained that the fostering of caring, positive relationships with students enables better relationships with the wider community, and another acknowledged the role that student passion for the subject plays in his consultative relationships. Shannon suggested that enabling relationships to develop between students and communities, by ‘taking students into the community’ is fundamental to fostering positive consultative relationships.

All survey respondents highlighted the influence that their own attitude towards communities has on the development of consultative relationships. A genuine interest in and respect ‘for Indigenous cultures and heritage’ was identified by several teachers as fundamental to the consultation process. Some teachers demonstrate these qualities by ‘listening to thoughts and opinions’, ‘being friendly and open’, and expressing a ‘willingness to learn’. The survey responses suggest that successful consultation requires teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Studies to express more than simply a professional regard for community members, although the fostering of professional relationships was identified as an important factor by Brian. A sincere, personal commitment to the students, community and pedagogy of the subject are considered vital if successful consultation is expected.

None of the teachers who responded to the survey are doing their job in isolation, nor was the process of developing relationships engaged with in the absence of support. CECs are heavily relied upon at several stages of the consultative process. Their contacts within communities are utilised by teachers who are seeking to establish their own relationships with the community, and their role in introducing teachers to relevant individuals and organisations is valued by all teachers who work with them. The knowledge of CECs is also utilised during the development of unit plans and work programs, and during organisation of school-community events. Working with teachers is, however, only part of a CEC’s job description. CECs are expected to provide ‘individual and group support to [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] students in the areas of personal, academic and social skills and behaviour management’ and ‘provide cross-cultural awareness training to the broader school community in order to enhance understanding and empathy for the educational and related social needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary students’ (Department of Education and Training [DET], 2010). The time they have available to devote to consultation and curriculum issues is, consequently, limited.

Branches of institutions such as DET’s Indigenous Schooling Support Units (ISSU) are utilised by some teachers of the subject to find resources and information about subject. ISSUs provide schools with professional development, resources and information, with the aim to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (DET, 2011). Community organisations such as Elders’ groups and Indigenous education groups were also reported as being invaluable to the process of consultation, as teachers are able to meet with a number of people and discuss a variety of topics relevant to their subject. School-based Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives (EATSIP) committees or groups of RATEP students were also reported as providing support to teachers through the sharing of ideas and knowledge or the provision of contact details of other community members. The development of more informal relationships through participation in community events was raised by all respondents as vital to their practice.

Each of the respondents has a role outside of ‘teacher’ that enables them to engage with Indigenous community members. Regular meetings with the local EATSIP group has provided Brian with opportunities to engage community members in the activities of his Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies class, to seek feedback about class activities from the group, and to provide the group with

feedback from the class. Mark participates in Elders' group meetings by invitation, and Indigenous education forums which are usually held each month. Like the EATSIPs meetings, these groups provide opportunities for teachers to engage in consultation with multiple community members and gain an insight into diverse perspectives of individuals. Kathy's work with RATEP students has enabled her to foster stronger relationships with her community.

All respondents reported working closely with a key person with whom initial consultation is conducted and through which other relationships are developed. The teachers who participated in the project had all established relationships with some members of their local Indigenous community prior to taking on their current role within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, although one of these teacher's initial contact was limited to the CEC. These relationships developed as the result of membership of committees and other groups that enable Indigenous community members and teachers to work collaboratively, attendance at community events, or from working with community on other school-based projects. These previous relationships are considered to be particularly valuable to the interviewed teachers, several of whom suggested that they would not have known where to start when they began to teach the subject were it not for these relationships, nor would they engage in the level of consultation they currently do.

### Factors Impeding Consultation

Full-time high school teachers working in Queensland state schools are paid to work 25 hours per week. Of this time, 210 minutes are set aside for preparation and correction time (Queensland Industrial Relations Commission, 2009). In Queensland secondary schools this non-teaching time is allocated to teachers as part of their timetables, and tends to take the place of several whole teaching periods spread over different days.

Time constraints were identified by all teachers as impeding their capacity to effectively engage in community consultation. These constraints take several forms, including teacher and student timetables, assessment deadlines, and paperwork required to be completed prior to student engagement with community members.

*Because of the timetabling and you only have X amount of time available for the class, quite often the other teachers go 'Well they're missing out on my lesson'. So you can't get them out for half a day or a day, you know, because they're missing out on someone else's class. Then you've got to book the bus, you've got to have a bus driver, you've got to have funding for that, it's got to come out of a faculty purse somewhere, and then you've got to put in risk assessment forms and you've got to put in change to routine forms for the school, you know. And by the time you do all that you think 'Well, is it worth it?'*

*... We're lucky if you even hear the term 'NAIDOC' [National Aborigines and Islanders Day of Observance Committee] on*

*NAIDOC week ... People didn't want kids missing classes and being out all day. And I think it was just a big 'too hard basket' for some people. And again, funding. You'd go to admin, you know — 'Who's going to fund it? Where are you going to get the money to do it? What faculty is it going to come out of?' And again, the paperwork associated with it, you know, risk assessment — you've got to fill out before you do everything now, and the change of routine paperwork. (Shannon)*

*I guess what you mean by time, is running out of it. I've found that that is a problem — you know, we have our deadlines and we need to have stuff done by now, but that's not always the way that communities work, and I guess patience is something that you have to learn and I think the answer to that is to be very well prepared so that you've got plenty of time and begin the consultation process early ... You've got certain work that has to be handed in. You know, it's no use embarking on a local area study thinking maybe you can do it in a term because sometimes it takes a lot longer than that to arrange a meeting with some of the people that you might want to talk with. (Kathy)*

Teachers' perception of a lack of time and funding to conduct the various components of their jobs are not isolated to teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. Education Queensland has also indicated that 'the issue of timetabling and workload of teachers ... is well understood' (personal communication, February 24, 2011).

### Institutional Support for Consultation

When asked about the degree of support they receive from the school, EQ and QSA, the responses from teacher participants were varied. Teachers in northern Queensland with high Indigenous populations said that their school administration team appears to value consultation. This is demonstrated by various staff members working with community members, and those community members having a presence within the school.

*We have an administration that works pretty closely with the local community and it's very conscious of acknowledging all cultures and consulting with the community about various things. I'm sure it doesn't always happen but I think when you have a large percentage of your population who are Indigenous I think it's only — the way that it has to be. (Kathy)*

*A lot of schools up here in the north have got a high proportion of Indigenous students. And so, I think consultation is valued. But I don't know further down south whether it would be the same. (Shannon)*

The southern schools in which the other two teachers work also have higher than average Indigenous populations, but report a lack of commitment to consultation by other teachers and administration staff.

*I think the idea is sort of brushed over, definitely not valued as highly as it should be in a lot of situations, because we live in such a fast-paced society that people seem to think we can get away with, sort of, doing it very quickly and without much thought or effort. So, generally, it's been swept under the rug at times. (Mark)*

*Honestly, I don't think the administration here values consultation enough. I think they rely too much on the CEC. And I rely too much on the CEC as well, I fully admit to that. But I think that the school administration needs to do more to actively engage with the local Elders and the local community and I think they do rely too much on the CEC. (Brian)*

The teachers interviewed believe that the QSA is committed to encouraging engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and embedding Indigenous perspectives. Several of the teachers have had opportunities to work with QSA staff in various capacities and this personal contact appears to have reinforced their positive impression of the dedication of the staff there. While two teachers suggested that Education Queensland demonstrate some kind of commitment to the consultation process, this was expressed through policy documents, not through any practical measures to ensure the implementation of policy.

*Um, I think QSA does [value consultation] and I say that because of everything that's coming through in all the syllabus materials. I mean, obviously, it's a great thing that they're running this as a senior subject and I know there aren't equivalent subjects in every state. I think there's something in South Australia, but I don't think there's an equivalent in every state, so it's a good thing that the QSA is running this subject. But, in all of the subjects there are those specific references to embedding Indigenous perspectives, incorporating Indigenous history or Indigenous literature so I think the QSA is trying to do something.*

*Ah, Ed. Queensland as a whole, I mean we do have things like EATSIPS, we do have people at District Offices and Regional Offices talking a lot of talk . . . But, from my perspective on the ground, I see that as a lot of talk, I don't see a lot of follow through on those sort of things. And I think too often that's the case, that there's a lot of rhetoric that comes through from the Central and District Offices and nowhere near enough follow through. (Brian)*

*[With regards to EQ and QSA] I don't know really — I think everyone is much more aware than they used to be. Obviously, you can see it more in the new syllabus. In the Studies syllabus — the idea of consultation is even more important than was acknowledged before and I guess it's just an evolving thing with our culture in Australia really. (Kathy)*

*Look, from the people I know in QSA, through my subject and being a member of State Panel, very much so. Ed. Queensland . . . Well, I think that it is, because of the fact that they've now said: 'You must show that you are addressing issues of equity, such as Indigenous perspectives within your classroom plans and your work programs and stuff like that.' So, putting that in, and now it being a directive, I think they're showing they are valuing . . . because you can't put that sort of thing in and then expect teachers to go and do it if there's no one that they can go to [within EQ]. (Shannon)*

This final comment suggests that Shannon considers some degree of consultation facilitation to be the responsibility of Education Queensland. I asked Shannon whether she is currently provided with an opportunity to consult with

community during school time: 'No, I have to do everything like that in my own time.'

There is a clear view that the relevant educational institutions are making inroads in the area of Indigenous community consultation, but there is doubt as to the level of commitment by those who can assist with the process in a practical way.

### Ideal Situation

During the interviews the teachers were asked what an ideal situation would be that would facilitate better consultation. Brian, who had earlier stated that he and other staff rely too heavily on the CEC, suggested that two CECs would help to improve consultation if one of the CEC's role was to work exclusively with staff. He would also like to have regular opportunities to meet with a variety of people associated with the subject and Indigenous communities.

*Like I keep saying I'm lucky that I've got a good CEC who's supportive and who is willing to let staff like me lean on her a bit. I actually think that the CECs should be supported more. And, perhaps in some schools having more than one CEC would be useful. Because the CECs do do a lot of work . . . and their job is to be working with the community, working with the parents, and they don't really have to be doing as much work in the schools with the teachers as they are. So maybe in terms of initiatives coming through from the District and Central Offices, there could be more support for CECs, possibly putting more staff into schools so that perhaps in a school like this that does have a significant Indigenous population you could have a CEC whose focus is on working with the community and a CEC whose focus is working with staff and developing staff. (Brian)*

Frequent opportunities to devote time exclusively to aspects of consultation were mentioned by Mark and Shannon.

*I would really like to see a planning day, just each term . . . each term for myself, catch up with people that I haven't used in the classroom, or I haven't spoken to for a while, just as a catch-up day to members of my community, Indigenous members of the community that have helped me, or would help me if I asked, as a, just a polite, respectful 'Hi, this is Shannon, just getting in touch with you. Just wondering how you are. We might be working on this during the year, can I call you if I can during the term.' Just a little thing like that would be lovely, that shows respect, that keeps the lines of communication open. And by talking to people that way they might say 'Oh, so and so's just moved into town', or 'That person's left now, but . . .', 'Oh, this is open' . . . I believe a teacher of that subject in a school that knows a number of people from the community, I think myself, I should be given that day to catch up with people, to get a current list of people who're available during that term who could come in for different topics and things like that, and then distribute it to staff. (Shannon)*

Kathy suggested that flexibility around meeting times is important and would like some extra time during the year to devote to consultation and meetings. She also wishes



to enable greater participation in activities designed to enhance relationships between the school and the community.

While the reasons for wanting a specific day or days set aside for consultation varied, all teachers would like to see a day regularly set aside so they can strengthen professional relationships with other staff and community members. The provision of another staff member who can facilitate the consultative process was put forward by one teacher, and the suggestion is in line with other solutions that recognise the lack of time for current staff to satisfactorily engage in consultation.

## Conclusions

The teachers interviewed for this project clearly identified a negative relationship between current timetables and deadlines and their capacity to engage in effective consultation. Respondents reported a desire to engage in consultation but timetables, deadlines, funding, heavy workloads and a lack of time to foster positive, professional relationships with communities undermine their ability to do so. Although the number of participants who took part in this study was small, the unanimity of their responses is compelling, especially considering the total number of teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies stood at 13 at the time of the interviews.

Consultation is required by the authors of the 2009 syllabus because it can 'help draw communities and schools together by building trust at a local level', 'ensure accurate and suitable information', make certain 'that respect is shown for ownership of cultural knowledge', and because 'the course will be richly enhanced if the ethics of consultation are followed' (QSA, 2009a, p. 24). The Department of Education encourages community engagement in order to 'empower community members to engage with schools from their own perspectives', 'implement "embedding" strategies successfully, for evaluating how well Indigenous perspectives have been embedded in the school, and to keep up to date with current community needs and aspirations' (DET, 2011, p. 32). The lack of time that teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Studies have to commit to consultation impedes all of the goals of the Department and QSA. As a result, the perspectives of Indigenous people are unlikely to be incorporated into the curriculum as desired, students will miss out on the benefits that consultation can contribute to their studies, and teachers and communities are often burdened with the blame for not adequately engaging in consultation.

Schools and state education departments must ensure that time and resources are provided for all staff to develop relationships with members of the local community. Australia is currently transitioning to a national curriculum that expects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures to be included across subjects, so the

issues raised by the four participants are likely to become increasingly relevant for all teachers. It is not enough to require teachers to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives or consult with local people; these aspects of work need to be facilitated by institutions. As demonstrated in Brian's story, there can be little time to prepare to teach a new subject, so previously established connections are often vital for the success of future relationships. The regular provision of time in the school calendar for the fostering of professional relationships within the community was a recommendation of all interviewed participants.

School and external timetables and deadlines are impeding the consultation-related goals of teachers and communities, as well as those of EQ and QSA. Reconsideration of how these consultative goals can be achieved within a modified framework of school timetables would be advantageous. Current timetables are creating a divergence of policy goals but, like the provision of time for teachers to engage in consultation, must be adequately dealt with in order for the aims of social justice to be achieved.

For teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in particular, it is also recommended that several days per term be set aside in order that they may further consultative networks and relationships. These days may consist of phone calls or visits to reestablish contacts and foster new ones, as suggested by Shannon. They may also involve meetings of teachers of the subject, service providers, CECs and other interested people, in order to share resources, ideas and stories.

The vital role that support staff, particularly CECs, play in the success of community consultation must be adequately recognised. Further research into the work that CECs are currently doing would be beneficial as it appears that they could be experiencing workload issues akin to those teachers are facing. Brian's suggestion that another staff member be employed in the capacity of community-teacher liaison also has the potential to alleviate some of the concerns raised by the teachers around knowing appropriate people to contact and the time required to organise meetings.

If consultation is to be embedded into the everyday practice of teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, there needs to be a more genuine commitment to the process by those with the capacity to make structural changes to schools. Such a commitment should include providing funding and amending timetables to enable consultative relationships to develop, recognising the role that CECs often play in the consultation process and ensuring they are not consequently suffering from excessive workloads, and examining the impacts of school-based and external deadlines on the implementation of the outcomes of consultation. While these institutions are making all the right noises around reconciliation, closing the education gap and embedding Indigenous perspectives, teachers are seeing little on the ground to demonstrate

a willingness to adapt current structures to facilitate the practical implementation of these policies.

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### **About the Author**

Jacinta Maxwell is a Pākehā New Zealander and non-Indigenous Australian. She was raised in Aotearoa and moved to Australia in her late teens. Jacinta completed a Bachelor of Indigenous Studies through Southern Cross University several years later. After gaining teaching qualifications, she worked in a rural/remote secondary school where she taught various subjects, including History and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. She currently teaches in the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland in Giabal and Jarowair country, Toowoomba. Her teaching areas include teacher identity, philosophies of education, and the Australian history curriculum. She recently completed a Master's degree and is working towards a PhD, investigating the intentions behind the cross curriculum priorities of the Australian Curriculum.