

WALKING FORWARD TOGETHER: DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF RECONCILIATION PRINCIPLES WITHIN THE FACULTY OF LAW BUSINESS AND CREATIVE ARTS PROJECT REPORT

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I. PROJECT AIMS

Our project seeks to design a sustainable response to the JCU Reconciliation Statement in the context of teaching practice with the FLBCA.

The JCU Reconciliation Statement embodied in the key theme of the Curriculum Refresh, in one sense provides a methodology for achieving this: integrating ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, perspectives and experience’ into subjects – through the reconciliation prism.

This provides the context and philosophy for curriculum design in this project – an *approach* to curriculum design (‘mutually respectful relationships’; ‘raising awareness’; ‘changing attitudes’; ‘encouraging action’...). It also however provides a *content* focus (‘Indigenous history and culture’).

To achieve the aim, the project seeks to:

- Identify an appropriate process by which to integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, perspectives and experiences into the faculty curriculum; and
- Liaise with appropriate stakeholders to identify a means of engaging local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the FLBCA.

II. THE CHALLENGE

The project has revealed three interrelated challenges. First, gaining traction within practice in the faculty; secondly, giving meaning to what are ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives’; and thirdly, understanding the scope of the project within the entire institutional policy and practice framework.

A. Existing Practice in the Faculty

In our faculty, there seem to be pockets of practice that ‘cover’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues or content, but it seems that *knowledge* and *perspectives* are missing. It is unclear from the original curriculum refresh reporting framework the extent to which the Faculty’s courses embedded the principles of the Reconciliation Statement. In addition, there was evidence that schools did not identify the relevance

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of some parts of their discipline/s of these perspectives. This has been identified elsewhere as a barrier to effectively integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues in curriculum.¹

Additionally, there was no evidence of development of curricula ‘in consultation with Indigenous staff and students’.

B. Meaning of ‘Perspectives’

In the context of this project, it was considered that the contested nature of the idea of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and the relevance or not of content meant a real possibility for resistance to engagement in the project. This made it desirable initially to engage Faculty staff without necessarily fixing a definition of what constituted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, perspectives and experience. Part of the learning process embedded within the project was to elicit an understanding of these terms from Faculty academic staff involved in the project. Meaning of these terms could be constructed with the assistance of external consultants based on staff engagement in the project of curricular development itself.

C. Wider Institutional Context

As this project has progressed, we have noted that the policy framework in support of curriculum that exists in other institutions seems to be an essential ingredient in successfully incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, perspectives and experience within curriculum. This has made it challenging to explore this aspect of curriculum in a ‘compartmentalised’ way ie within the faculty itself. The extent of curriculum is much wider than might traditionally be expected.

These challenges have led to two main findings.

III. TWO MAIN FINDINGS

First, JCU itself has a community network of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students that represents an important starting point for community engagement. This was recognised as the first layer of community engagement for this project. In light of the need to develop a more strategic and coordinated approach to inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students in the integration of knowledge, perspectives and experiences, it was considered premature to engage externally to the university in the context of this project. The focus of the project turned instead to build on existing networks.

In analysing reports by the faculty Indigenous student support staff, we also clearly saw that there is a lot of engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through the work of these staff. The project group has considered this to be instrumental in conceptualising a sustainable means of developing faculty-community partnerships. This is reflected also in other institutional programs described in the literature.²

¹ Rhonda Hagan and Henk Huijser ‘Are the Sciences Indigenisable: Of Course They Are!’ (Paper presented at 2nd Annual Psychology and Indigenous Australians: Teaching, Practice and Theory Conference, Adelaide, Australia, 14-15 July 2008.).

² See eg Huia Woods ‘Indigenous Space in Institutions: Frameworks Around Maori Legal Academics at Waikato’ (2008) (2) *MAI Review* 1.

This analysis identified that we possibly needed to look more closely to the nature of curriculum itself to build in the idea of relationships and connections in a way that would facilitate engagement of communities outside JCU.

To this extent, we considered community engagement as an integral dimension of curriculum within an Indigenous perspectives framework rather than as a separate consideration.

The second key finding is the capacity of a framework of ‘relationally responsive pedagogy’ to fulfill the multiple dimensions of curriculum that embeds Indigenous perspectives. This approach provides the rationale for our finding of the limitations of our original suggested approach to community engagement – that primacy needs to be given to respect and connection before embarking on knowledge and practice. Likewise, this approach provides a framework for thinking about our teaching for *all* students.

Using the framework of respect and connection, we identified three speakers, all Aboriginal, with a deep intellectual and practical engagement in the philosophy of relationally responsive pedagogy – Ernie Grant, Karen Martin and Tyson Yunkaporta. The three speakers though all approach the issue in slightly different ways.

Unfortunately, our workshop coincided with the cyclone and was postponed – we expect to hold it in June-July.

In the meantime however, we have engaged Tyson Yunkaporta, one of the original speakers, to facilitate workshops for interested staff in developing curriculum in accordance with this relationally responsive pedagogy. We held the first workshops only last week.

IV. HOW CAN THE FINDINGS BEST INFORM FUTURE PRACTICE AT JCU?

We are very hopeful that the framework will provide a meaningful approach to curriculum development that satisfies so many of the goals of our contemporary curriculum. Issues such as the tropical agenda, sustainability, internationalization and WIL can all be embedded themselves through a thoughtful application of this pedagogical framework. Attributes of ethics and service likewise are reflected in this framework.

Once the framework is put into practice, other things can follow. Recognition of the importance of relationships and connection should lead to a wholistic approach to engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community; and the importance of having a whole of institution approach to developing appropriate spaces, relationships, policies, courses and subjects that both reach out to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and allow these communities to reach out to non-Indigenous members of the JCU community. This is the spirit of reconciliation.