Indigenisation of Curricula – Intent, Initiatives and Implementation

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Abstract

Indigenous education is a national priority in the Australian Tertiary Education sector. Consistent with this priority, in its 2008 Report on the Audit of the University of Newcastle, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) affirmed the University’s ‘desire to expand the Indigenisation of curricula’ (AUQA, 2008). In meeting this goal the University recognizes several challenges, including defining ‘Indigenisation’ and what it entails; the limited development of Indigenous pedagogical frameworks in Australia; and the sector-wide shortage of Indigenous academics.

This paper examines the University of Newcastle’s progress towards our goal of Indigenised curricula by focusing on three inter-related issues: auditing Indigenous content across the University; examining models of good practice; and capacity building staff.

Keywords: indigenisation, curriculum, good practice.

The University of Newcastle is nationally recognized in several discipline areas for the quality of its Indigenous content and success in producing Indigenous graduates. While many of the current initiatives are contained within the auspices of the Wollotuka Student Support Unit and have been commended by AUQA, our current direction has also seen the development of a number of new projects that reflect the growing synergies between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and students in Indigenous Education. One of our foundational commitments affirmed in our 2008 AUQA audit concerns expanding our Indigenisation of curriculum as a ‘whole-of-university’ responsibility. Our progress towards this has included the need to define and clarify the intent, in a discipline-specific and meaningful way; to encourage and communicate innovative ways to create an Indigenised curriculum; to capacity build staff knowledge and resources; and to support the implementation of an Indigenised curriculum through University-wide networks that facilitate communication and celebrate models of good practice. These stages are being monitored as part of our quality enhancement framework to ensure that Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and staff experience the full benefit of this initiative.

Findings from the University of Newcastle Faculty-based Audit

One initial requirement in coordinating the extension of Indigenised curricula was to review the University’s existing and potential Indigenous inclusions. Accordingly, the University of Newcastle Academic Senate resolved to request Faculty Boards to provide reports:

1. Identifying which programs do and do not include Indigenous content;
2. Identifying courses offered by the Faculty which include Indigenous content and providing comment on the level of consultation undertaken; and
3. Identifying courses which currently do not contain Indigenous content but which may warrant revision to include relevant Indigenous content.

Reports have been received from the five Faculties, namely Education and Arts; Business and Law; Health; Science and IT; and Engineering and the Built Environment. In asking staff to consider their
Indigenisation of courses, the audit process itself has generated a reflective environment. Reports from Faculties showed willingness by academics to include Indigenous content in their programs and courses with requests for more comprehensive and coordinated infrastructure to support the process. Proposed aspects of this infrastructure include developing guidelines to facilitate consultation between University and Indigenous stakeholders; providing a space for peer dialogue; and creating a repository of models of good practice. The Faculty of Science and IT further suggested that the mandatory inclusion of an Indigenisation of curriculum measure should form part of the external review of programs.

Faculties expressed concerns on the precise nature of what Indigenisation and Indigenous content entailed. This corresponds to the sector-wide difficulty in formalising definitions on Indigenous issues (Stella & Woodhouse, 2006), including the foundational contestation of Western knowledge by Indigenous knowledge traditions (Vigilante, 2007). The University of Newcastle is currently using an open-ended definition acknowledging that an Indigenised curriculum may meet the following social justice criteria:

1. The curricular justice goal, which has as its objective the provision of educational opportunity and outcomes. [In this, the University of Newcastle’s goal is to overcome the historical disenfranchisement of Indigenous students in higher education and have their participation and success rates equal to non-Indigenous students].

2. The wider responsibility goal, which focuses on educating all students for social justice and anti-racism through programs of anti-racism education (Vigilante, 2007).

The five Faculty reports varied significantly in approach to Indigenisation and subsequent recommendations. For instance, the Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment noted the significance of Land Rights issues to informed practice in the engineering field and re-nominated their promotion of ABOR1330 Traditional Aboriginal Societies as an elective. Other discipline areas such as Drama and Fine Art identified the appropriateness of a far more comprehensive Indigenisation across numerous courses. These differences highlight the need for the University’s approach to be flexible and dynamic creating synergies that will be responsive to the spirit and practice of Indigenisation, while maintaining disciplinary distinctiveness. As such, a generic course for all students is a less viable option when compared with embedding content and cultural competencies in discipline and industry-specific areas (AVCC, 2001).

The Faculty audit also revealed that Indigenous staff contributed significantly to our current implementation of an Indigenised curriculum. In addition, it also noted that many non-Indigenous staff have expertise on Indigenous issues and link their inclusion of Indigenous perspectives to informal Indigenous community and collegial networks. Non-Indigenous staff held a number of liaison positions with Faculties to support Indigenous students and engage with our Indigenous Unit and communities. Sector literature supports our experience and notes that Indigenisation cannot be achieved by Indigenous academics alone (IHEAC, 2006).

In considering how to support the Faculties in the Indigenisation of curriculum we explored introducing a double-degree structure, which would combine the revised Bachelor of Aboriginal Studies with other degree programs. Tentative interest was expressed by program coordinators in Social Work, Sport Science, Nursing, Speech Pathology, Occupational Therapy and Early Childhood. Investigations, including a market evaluation, determined that the double-degree option was not viable at the present time. Alternative models involve the inclusion of a subject to develop students’ Indigenous-related competencies in degree programs and the pervasive inclusion of Indigenous content across courses. While we acknowledge each of these options will need to be carefully developed, particularly where the degrees are part a broader process of accreditation, our Indigenisation in Medicine and Education provide two successful models on which to base our new offerings.
Models of Good Practice

Indigenisation of curriculum is a relatively recent concept within the Australian tertiary sector (Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008) and literature is limited (Gower, Nakata & Mackean, 2007). As such, attempting to benchmark our experience against the sector has proved difficult. The model of Embedding Indigenous Perspectives (EIP) trialed by Queensland University of Technology (Hart & Moore, 2005; McLaughlin & Whatman, 2007) has provided thought-provoking examples for consideration in the University of Newcastle context. Further, the incorporation of Indigenising Curriculum as a focus in the University Teaching and Learning Unit, as demonstrated by University of Southern Queensland (Hagen & Huisjer, 2008) has merit. Discipline specific initiatives such James Cook University’s Social Work program (Gair, Thomson & Miles, 2005); Griffith University’s Law Indigenisation (Douglas, 2005); Southern Cross University’s Gnibi programs (Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008) and Psychology at Curtin University (Sonn, Garvey, Bishop & Smith, 2000) have also been reviewed.

Given the significance placed on the Indigenisation of curriculum, greater promotion of models, expertise and materials in a nationally coordinated initiative should be encouraged. In the interim, we will continue to develop a strong internal culture that will extend our models of good practice and those from within the sector. We also recognise it is critical to link the Indigenisation of curricula with publishing outputs both to contribute to the ongoing debate, and to encourage feedback from the sector, as means of enhancing quality.

The University of Newcastle has been recognized for its strengths as a sector leader in recruiting and retaining Indigenous students, particularly in its Medicine programs, graduating approximately 60% of doctors in Australia who identify as Indigenous (Lawson, Armstrong & Van Der Weyden, 2007) and also providing access to a strong Indigenised curriculum for all its students. Lawson et al., (2007) state that the University of Newcastle Medical model is characterized by an approach that has focused on a combination of ‘community, equity and engagement by the medical profession’ that maintained standards of academic rigor.

Head of School, Medicine and Public Health, Professor Michael Hensley (Lawson, Armstrong & Van Der Weyden, 2007) has commented, ‘We want to make sure that the Indigenous health curriculum is much more than just a document’. In practice this has included a broad commitment from the School and allied programs, coupled with the inclusion of Indigenous lecturers to provide ‘first hand’ perspectives in the discipline of Indigenous health (UoN, 2009a). This is extended by the University Department of Rural Health, which provides innovative Cultural Inter-professional Learning Workshops. Student feedback for these includes:

- It really made it clear that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers are both equally important in dealing with Aboriginal health problems.

- It really went above and beyond. It made me realise how much I really didn’t know without actually talking to Aboriginal people (UoN, 2009b).

The field of Education has also been an area of innovation at the University of Newcastle where the inclusion of an Aboriginal education course has been a mandatory part of undergraduate teacher training. Coordinated by Wollotuka, School of Aboriginal Studies the course is entirely taught by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff imparting an experiential perspective for teaching Indigenous students. This is responsive to sector research with student teachers indicating a clear desire for ‘hands-on’ strategies for implementing Indigenous education imperatives (Craven et al., 2005). Our student evaluation data for this course returns consistently positive feedback, with all respondents in the 2008 offering agreeing or strongly agreeing that the course improved their knowledge.
Further, the Quality Teaching Model, pioneered by Newcastle academics Gore and Ladwig, has provided research-driven strategies for improving teacher education and practice across a variety of fields that includes a focus on Indigenous learners (Gore & Ladwig, 2006; Gore, Ladwig, Griffiths & Amosa, 2007). This has been adopted across the sector by academics involved in tertiary teacher training and in evaluating NSW Public Schools (Hall, 2004).

We also recognize that Aboriginal Studies electives are being taken by students from across a wide range of Faculties. For instance, in previous offerings ABOR 1330 Traditional Aboriginal Societies has been taken by students undertaking degrees in Management, Arts, Teaching, Science, Oral Health, Podiatry, Exercise and Sport Science and Psychology. Our Indigenisation will therefore take a varied approach, including Faculty controlled courses, and service teaching from our Indigenous Unit.

**Capacity Building Indigenous Staff**

National data from the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC, 2006; IHEAC, 2007) suggests while university expansion of Indigenised curricula must be prioritized, this must be allied to increasing the levels of Indigenous staff participation in tertiary governance and there should be greater Indigenous representation in a wide range of academic governance roles (IHEAC, 2006). Anderson, Robertson and Rose (2007) identify several measures as critical in this process. These include increasing doctoral qualifications for Indigenous staff; developing a robust national Indigenous research agenda; recruiting more Indigenous staff into the tertiary sector and increasing the proportion of senior Indigenous academics. The University of Newcastle concurs with IHEAC on these priorities and is committed to capacity building Indigenous staff and students and monitoring the achievement of these goals through various internal data collection mechanisms.

These projects include the Indigenous Researcher Development Mentorship Scheme, which matches Indigenous Early Career Researchers with non-Indigenous senior mentors to increase successful outcomes for Indigenous ARC Discovery Projects. Reciprocally, the University of Newcastle has also matched senior Indigenous academics with non-Indigenous researchers wishing to negotiate with Indigenous communities (Hodge & Lester, 2006).

While the University of Newcastle currently employs only Indigenous staff within its School of Aboriginal Studies, other universities employ non-Indigenous staff in their corresponding units and find that this enhances dialogic possibilities (see for instance Curtin University: Carey, 2008). Attention will also be given to considering new ways to create dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the University of Newcastle. The creation of an Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) sub-branch on the Ourimbah Campus, funded through the 2008 University Equity Initiative Grants, has already added to this potential allowing Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and student members to gain an insight into Aboriginal education governance as participants.

**Conclusion**

Indigenous education has been a priority at the University of Newcastle for more than a decade. Medicine and Education are areas of clear competency and achievement which we are extending to a ‘whole of university’ responsibility. The affirmation by AUQA of our desire to expand the Indigenisation of curriculum at UoN has allowed us to acknowledge our successes and to engage more broadly with Indigenous trends within the sector. Our Faculty Audit shows that as a university we are committed to the goals of an Indigenised curriculum. While acknowledging the need to increase our formalized networks, resources and staffing, the analysis of our own activities and of good practice in the sector has provided a clearer perspective on the way forward.
References


