Teaching for cultural diversity
Australian Indigenous perspectives in curriculum and workforce quality

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Abstract

Governments across Australia recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Australians with the oldest continuing cultures of humanity.

Strategies to improve the quality of teaching and learning are central to reducing the current gap in education outcomes between Indigenous people and all Australians.

This paper reflects upon national curriculum and workforce reforms, aimed at increasing the cultural diversity of Australian teachers to reflect the backgrounds of the students they teach.

The paper also examines the professional capabilities required by all teachers to respond to the learning needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

Two recent national projects in schooling and teacher education that exemplify effective partnerships include:

1. More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative, a national 4-year $AUS 7.5 million initiative to increase the number and professional capacity of Indigenous teachers in Australian schools;

2. Respect-Relationships-Reconciliation (RRR), a national network of 26 universities utilising digital technologies to support education faculties to better prepare graduates to be effective teachers in Indigenous education.

The critique includes research evidence on the profile of Australian teachers, and the lessons learned for nations with school children from diverse backgrounds.

Australian Aboriginal leader Professor Peter Buckskin argues that national collaborative action by education and community stakeholders is crucial to achieve lasting reform in teacher quality.

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Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information.

*United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*¹

As an Indigenous man from the Narungga² nation on the Yorke Peninsula, South Australia and a descendant of the oldest living culture of humanity, I acknowledge the many Indigenous populations of the ASEAN region, and pay my respect to their elders past and present.

I celebrate their survival and resilience in maintaining their rich cultural heritage for generations to come.

The First Australians

Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people share similar history and challenges with up to 500 million³ Indigenous peoples in all regions of the world, representing the greater part of the world’s cultural diversity, who have created and speak the major share of the world’s almost 7000 languages.

Indigenous peoples continue to be confronted with poor socio-economic outcomes, including:

- marginalisation;
- racism;
- extreme poverty;
- poor education and health outcomes;
- over-representation in the criminal justice and mental health systems; and
- human rights violations.

Australia is a rich country by global standards, albeit with wealth and living standards unevenly distributed across its population. Health and economic difficulties facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are particularly substantial. Both urban and remote Indigenous populations suffer disadvantage on a number of social indicators such as health, education, unemployment and poverty.

Prior to colonisation in 1788, Australia was populated solely by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. At that period, there were approximately 700 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages spoken with an estimated population of 750,000 people⁴.

In the 2011 Australian Census on Population and Housing, there were 669,900 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or 3% of the total Australian population.

Contrary to popular belief that many Indigenous Australians reside in remote locations, most Australian Indigenous people live in urban areas, with approximately 75% of the population living in urban and regional centres⁵.
No one should be under any illusion about the difficulty of swiftly overcoming two centuries of comparative failure. Nevertheless, it would be complacent, even neglectful, to not redress, from day one, the most intractable difficulty our country has ever faced.

Australian Prime Minister’s Closing the Gap Report⁶, 2014

Governments across Australia have agreed to undertake urgent action to close the gap between the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians. To drive action, the Prime Minister, Premiers and Chief Ministers have agreed through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to six ambitious targets:

- to close the life expectancy gap within a generation;
- to halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade;
- to ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities within five years;
- to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children within a decade;
- to halve the gap for Indigenous students in year 12 attainment rates by 2020; and
- to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.

Educationally, the main policy vehicle to progress these targets is the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan⁷.

This Action Plan identifies national, systemic and local level action areas in six priority domains, in which evidence shows will contribute towards improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, including:

- Readiness for school;
- Engagement and connections;
- Attendance;
- Literacy and numeracy;
- Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development; and
- Pathways to real post-school options.

This paper focuses on two successful national reform initiatives that include practical strategies to ‘close the gap’ in educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and to value Indigenous culture in schools and universities.

The two initiatives that primarily address the domain of Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development in the Action Plan above are the;

- More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI), designed to increase the cultural diversity of the Australian teaching workforce; and
- Respect, Relationships, Reconciliation (RRR), a series of digital resources to enable graduate teachers of all backgrounds to be responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

This paper asserts that the success of schooling and teacher reforms will only be achieved through national collaborative action. Fundamentally, any education reform in Australia requires the co-operation of all Australian jurisdictions, the Australian Commonwealth Government and a raft of education and community advocates.
Reform in Australian schools

In 2013, there were 261,585 full time equivalent (FTE) teachers working in 9,393 schools for a total of 3,645,519 students across the nation.

Schooling in Australia is primarily the responsibility of eight states and territories, who provide funding and regulate the public and private schools within its governing area.

Approximately 66% of students in Australia attend government schools, 20% attend Catholic schools and 14% attend independent schools.

Australian education leaders have embarked on an ambitious agenda of school reform in the last five years, including:

- Development of a national curriculum;
- Defined professional standards for teachers;
- Improving teacher education;
- Enhancing skills and knowledge of teachers and school leaders through their careers; and
- Improved teacher workforce data.

Cultural Diversity in Australian Schools

All teachers require the ability to work effectively with students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds and are codified in professional requirements for Australian teachers.

We contend that the learning needs of a culturally diverse student population will be better served by more culturally diverse education graduates and teaching workforce.

In Australian schools, the background and culture of most teachers do not reflect the student population that they teach.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are significantly under-represented in Australian schools. Indigenous children rarely see their own people teaching in their school, let alone their classroom.

The MATSITI Initiative

The More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) is a four-year national reform innovation designed to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people entering and remaining in teaching positions in Australian schools.

Developing strategies that enhance the professional and leadership capabilities of experienced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers also form a key component of this strategic initiative.

Key outcomes for the MATSITI project include:

- comprehensive qualitative and quantitative research reports on background factors, and various strategies and their effectiveness in increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers;
- a series of partnerships and co-investment agreements with school authorities, university schools of education and other agencies to achieve lasting reform;
- a national community engagement and marketing strategy to promote teaching as a career option for secondary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and adults.

To achieve workforce reform, the scope of this initiative encompasses the entire career lifecycle of a teacher - from aspirations to teacher education, to recruitment and career and leadership development.
To date, MATSITI has funded 56 teacher workforce reform projects\(^1\) worth over $3 million in schools and teacher education. These action-focused grants were awarded on a competitive basis to teacher education providers, school jurisdictions and Indigenous higher education centres.

Successful Indigenous education and workforce reforms have included:
- targeted student scholarships;
- mentoring, academic support;
- culturally safe practicum placements;
- affirmative recruitment policies;
- leadership development; and
- cultural awareness/competency training for school and university staff.

Research and evidence

A fundamental principle of the MATSITI Initiative is to establish a robust evidence base of current research to underpin action to improve employment outcomes in our schools.

The under-representation of Indigenous people in the Australian school workforce can now be accurately quantified through a landmark study in 2014, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Workforce Analysis*\(^2\).

Data from 2012 identified that there are approximately 3700 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, comprising just 1.2% of the total school workforce.

In 2013, 182,636 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attended school full-time in Australia, accounting for over 5% of all full-time students.

An average of 218 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people graduated from Australian university schools of education each year from 2007-2011, with an average 44% gaining employment in school\(^3\).

The research suggests that workforce reform strategies will need to be rapidly accelerated to meet a Closing the Gap target to *halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and other Australians by 2018*.

To complement quantitative data collection, MATSITI has undertaken comprehensive qualitative research into teacher education and workforce strategies and practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In 2012, MATSITI research\(^4\) identified professional experience (practicum) as a major exit point or ‘walking point’ for Indigenous students in teacher education courses.

Professional experience can often present barriers due to cultural differences between supervising teachers and Indigenous students.

Strategic Partnerships – Schools

Indigenous education reforms require collaborative action at national, systemic and local level.

In 2013, MATSITI commissioned a Scoping Plan\(^5\) as a blueprint for a national collaborative effort to increase the number and capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in Australian schools.

As the employing authorities for teachers, MATSITI has formed 15 strategic partnerships\(^6\) with Australian school jurisdictions in accordance with this framework.

An example of an effective schooling partnership is the NSW Department of Education and Communities\(^7\), which recruits over 100 Aboriginal teachers each year and employs over 1000 Indigenous teachers in total. These outcomes have occurred through:
- effective collaborations with universities;
targeted scholarships; 
- outreach into Aboriginal communities; and 
- early career placement and support.

In 2014, MATSITI signed an agreement with the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) to enable all Catholic education jurisdictions in Australia to attract and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into a successful teaching career. Outcomes for the project include:

- National Catholic Education network collaboration;
- audit and evaluation of recruitment processes;
- workforce data collection;
- National and local marketing and recruitment strategies; and
- action and succession planning frameworks.

**Strategic Partnerships – Teacher Education**

MATSITI has formed 24 strategic partnerships with universities to improve the success and engagement of Indigenous students within their schools and faculties of education.

MATSITI is working in collaboration with the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) and the higher education sector across Australia on a series of key initiatives in 2014-15.

One of these projects, *Engagement and Success* is providing support for university education faculty action plans and sector-wide reforms to increase participation and completion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in teacher education.

The Wollotuka Institute at the University of Newcastle mitigates practicum difficulties by planning culturally safe school placements and developing explicit skills in student resilience to deal with inappropriate attitudes from school staff, many of whom have had limited or no exposure to Indigenous people.

Further information about research and innovative practice in teacher education is available in the MATSITI submission on teacher education to the Australian Minister for Education.

**Promoting Teaching as a Career of Choice**

In addition to initiatives to train more teachers and increase recruitment and retention, MATSITI has supported projects to increase aspirations and attraction to consider teaching as a career of choice.

In accordance with a commitment to comprehensive evidence-based reform, MATSITI conducted market research into factors and perceptions that consciously/unconsciously contribute to the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people entering and remaining in teaching positions, and to ascertain the best means to attract this cohort into the teaching profession.

Participants in this research expressed the view that there are many gaps and obstacles to achieving a successful career in teaching for Indigenous people.

Participants identified the significant impact of family and community members, individual teachers who inspired them or other mentors on influencing a decision to consider a career in teaching.

Respondents also expressed the need for resilience in overcoming a larger than usual number of personal, social and financial obstacles in their journey to obtain a degree and begin a career in the teaching profession.

These barriers were particularly evident for the large number of mature age students who are considering university study and who are likely to have family responsibilities.
The MATSITI teaching career communications and marketing strategy has two objectives:

- significant levels of engagement with the MATSITI Initiative by education stakeholders across Australia; and
- promotional strategies and resources that lead to increased interest, attraction and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in Australian schools.

Career promotion strategies have included:

- regular publishing of successful teachers and projects via the MATSITI website;
- career workshops and events for Indigenous school students;
- use of social media channels including Facebook and Twitter;
- funding marketing activities by school jurisdictions and universities to attract Indigenous people to teacher education study and employment;
- Promotional campaigns for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and through Australian Indigenous press.

**Australian Professional Standards for Teachers**

The *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* are comprised of seven Standards which outline what teachers should know and be able to do. The Standards are grouped into three domains of teaching:

1. Professional Knowledge;
2. Professional Practice; and
3. Professional Engagement.

Within each Standard, *Focus Areas* provide further illustration of teaching knowledge, practice and professional engagement, and are separated into Descriptors at four professional career stages:

- Graduate;
- Proficient;
- Highly Accomplished; and
- Lead.

*As a nation Australia values the central role of education in building a democratic, equitable and just society—a society that is prosperous, cohesive and culturally diverse, and that values Australia’s Indigenous cultures as a key part of the nation’s history, present and future*

*Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young People*[^23],

*endorsed by all Education Ministers, 2008.*
Two Focus Areas from the Standards that are of relevance to Indigenous education are:

1.4: Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

2.4: Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The following RRR initiative is an example of reform that is designed to

- enable all Australian graduate teachers to meet these standards; and
- be responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The unit outline and content will address the common elements of an initial teacher education unit aimed at providing pre-service teachers with the necessary knowledge, understanding and skills to meet the Graduate career stage Focus Areas 1.4 and 2.4 of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.

The RRR Initiative

The Respect, Relationships, Reconciliation (RRR) digital resource is a collaborative project between MATSITI, the Australian Council of Deans of Education and 26 Australian universities to develop a web-based unit outline and digital resources.

The online resource is designed to support:

- the provision of initial teacher education;
- to improve teacher graduate knowledge; and
- skills in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

All teachers require content knowledge, structured professional experiences, and an understanding and skills in student learning.

These characteristics are underpinned by an understanding of cultural values and differences that are crucial to meet the diverse learning needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in our schools.

MATSITI contends that effective learning and teaching strategies for Indigenous education will benefit all students in Australian schools.

Extensive documentation and evidence exists regarding effective pedagogies for Indigenous students and Indigenous studies in schools which could be better utilised in teacher education programs. Effective learning and teaching examples include; Stronger Smarter, What Works and Dare to Lead.

Research and evidence

Despite policy rhetoric, the current capacity of initial teacher education providers to prepare their education graduates to be effective teachers in Indigenous education is patchy at best. Findings from international research included:

- separation and imbalance between Indigenous content and the transfer of effective teaching skills in pre-service teacher education;
- paucity of Australian and international Indigenous literature analysing the impact of racism on Indigenous education outcomes; and
• provision of Indigenous elective courses across institutions is clearly inconsistent.

MATSITI focus group research\(^2\) for the ‘RRR’ initiative identified similar findings, including:
• significant variation in exposure to Indigenous education in teacher education studies; and
• considerable anxiety from education graduates about their capacity to teach about Indigenous cultures.

The provision of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander core courses is undoubtedly inconsistent. In some institutions, only electives are offered.

The online resource project entitled *3Rs of Teaching: Respect, Relationships and Reconciliation* (RRR) was designed to support initial teacher education providers to incorporate these resources into their programs.

The Project Team has delivered the RRR Unit Outline as a suite of online modules and resources to support teacher educators delivering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education units within teacher education courses.

The result of this partnership is the development of a dynamic and flexible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education unit modules of professional learning activities, assessment tasks and resources.

Topics within the modules are underpinned by rich cultural integrity, research and pedagogical practice. RRR content and learning activities have undergone extensive consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and community representatives.

The RRR Unit Outline and associated web resources include:
• A website of general information about this project, initial teacher education and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.
• An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education unit outline and learning modules for incorporation or adaptation in university teacher education courses.
• A searchable content repository of relevant teacher education resources such as readings, activities, assessment tasks and web links.
• Cultural protocols including glossary of terminology and guides to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The RRR Unit Outline is published on the Moodle\(^3\) online learning management system and is publicly accessible at [www.rrr.edu.au/unit](http://www.rrr.edu.au/unit). Sample readings, learning activities, assessment tasks are saved in a searchable repository that enables additional content to be easily added to the unit.

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*A good teacher is like a candle — it consumes itself to light the way for others.*

*Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (n.d.)*

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Conclusion: Sustainable Cultural Change

The MATSITI project has gathered data and evidence that has the capacity to inform the development of future employment strategies and will identify further work required to sustain the gains made to date.

MATSITI researchers now have a database that profiles the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce. Despite the low numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and leaders, there is reason to acknowledge and celebrate Indigenous teachers and their contribution to school communities.

To achieve parity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers with the population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian schools, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP) launched by Governments in 1989 provides the values and principles to guide the unfinished business. The AEP is still relevant today as it was then, as it complements governments at both national and state and territory levels, and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plans (2010-2014).

The MATSITI project has drawn upon a rich cultural heritage, values, principles and practices, and has focused on building the capacity of the collective while valuing the individual.

Characteristics of the project process have been:

- privileging Indigenous voices in design and implementation;
- establishing and maintaining relationships;
- evidence-based approach;
- collaborative action at local, systemic and national levels;
- strategic and operational plans that are transparent, measurable, consultative and are well-communicated; and
- priority for resourcing within existing budgets.

The last three years has seen MATSITI bring together a broad cross section of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, leaders and aspiring teachers along with education systems and higher education providers. As a result of effective stakeholder management, we commenced a new conversation with a clear focus and purpose to increase, retain and promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in Australian schools.

This work has further enhanced relationships with the Deans and Heads of Schools of Education in the higher education sector, by working with the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE). In a relatively short period of time, a discourse was established built on mutual respect and commitment. The partnerships enabled the development of institutional action plans, and an audit of Indigenous content in initial teacher education programs.

The collaborative nature of this work provided the confidence to pursue the Respect, Relationships, Reconciliation (RRR) digital resource project, with the support of Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (ACDE). MATSITI is confident that ACDE will continue ongoing dialogue with Aboriginal and Torres Islander educators to finish the unfinished business.

This work has enabled the project team to gather evidence, analyse and invest in projects that have the capacity to create sustainable change. This has ensured that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are being heard in education institutions and further enhanced the capacity of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to work effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders educators.

It is envisaged that the final year of the project (in 2015) will produce compelling evidence for education jurisdictions, higher education institutions and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to support and promote the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in the classroom.
MATSITI has reignited the ‘fire in the belly’ of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education community. The project is well advanced to build upon the contribution made by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers - their legacy will sustain us into the future.

It is now up to Governments, educators and community members to maintain the momentum and sustain this workforce agenda into the future until education parity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and other Australians is achieved.

Biography: Professor Peter Buckskin

Dean: Indigenous Scholarship, Engagement and Research
University of South Australia

Professor Buckskin is a Narungga man from the Yorke Peninsula in South Australia. He is currently the Dean: Indigenous Scholarship, Engagement and Research at the University of South Australia. As an educator and professional bureaucrat for more than 34 years, Professor Buckskin’s passion has been the pursuit of educational excellence for Aboriginal students.


He is currently an Executive Member of the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium. In recognition of his work Professor Buckskin has received the Commonwealth Public Service Medal in the 2001 Australia Day Honours, Frank G Klassen Award for Leadership and Contribution to Teacher Education from the International Council on Education for Teaching (ICET) in 2003 and the National Deadly Award for Outstanding Achievement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education in 2005.

In 2007, he was elected as a Fellow of the Australian College of Educators. Professor Buckskin currently serves as Chair of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium, Chair of the South Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Consultative Body, Co-Chair of Reconciliation South Australia and member of the Australian Research Council’s Advisory Council.
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A copy of this paper and accompanying presentation is available at www.matsiti.edu.au/apeid.

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