

Indigenising the University Curriculum: An Interdisciplinary Collaborative Approach Between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Educators. A *Practice Report*

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Abstract

There is a national imperative to Indigenise the university curriculum, with Universities Australia (2023) recognising the inherent value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems. Indigenising the curriculum supports Indigenous students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and enables non-Indigenous students to engage with Indigenous histories, cultures and societies. While many non-Indigenous academics are keen to embed Indigenous perspectives, this work is often perceived as challenging in disciplines where such perspectives may not appear an obvious fit. Building on our leadership in this area, this practice report examines findings from a University of Queensland Teaching Innovation funded project that developed and piloted Indigenised teaching and learning activities across six courses in biomedical science, musicology, geography, veterinary science, general science and engineering. Undertaken in collaboration with an Indigenous reference group, the project highlights examples of changes made along with the challenges and benefits of this interdisciplinary, collaborative approach. We include key lessons to inform Indigenising curriculum practices across universities nationally.

Keywords: Indigenising curriculum; higher education, interdisciplinarity, collaboration

Introduction

The importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives into curriculum has been repeatedly emphasised in higher education reports and policy documents. For example, the Universities Australia *Indigenous Strategy 2022-2025* (2022) acknowledged the inherent value of Aboriginal peoples' unique knowledge systems. There have been concerted efforts made at a number of institutions to Indigenise curriculum and important work has been undertaken by universities to develop frameworks and design principles to guide Indigenisation of curriculum (e.g., Al-Natour & Fredericks, 2016; Bunda, 2022). However, the process of Indigenising curriculum is complex, and numerous researchers have noted the institutional support required and the challenges of poorly taught curriculum that can reinforce stereotypes and resistance from students, particularly within mandatory curriculum. Yet as Raciti (2022) notes, "there's a seemingly persistent reluctance to embed Australian Indigenous knowledges (yes, plural) and perspectives (also plural)" in some disciplines (p. 211). In addition, little is known about student and staff experiences of Indigenised curriculum. This focus on Indigenising the university curriculum is particularly relevant given the *Australian Universities Accord Final Report's* (Department of Education, 2024, p. 206) call for "valuing and supporting First Nations knowledge" and a renewed push to ensure best practice teaching methodologies and curriculum in university contexts.



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Building on our collaborative leadership in this space (Bunda & Barney, 2023–2025; Bunda et al., 2025), this practice report focuses on a project we co-led on Indigenising ‘absences’ in the curriculum. We discuss the process used to develop new Indigenised teaching and learning activities in six courses that were at the beginning stages of integrating Indigenous perspectives into their curriculum (biomedical science, musicology, geography, engineering, veterinary science and general science). The activities were developed through facilitated workshops and meetings with course coordinators in collaboration with an Indigenous reference group and an Indigenous learning designer. Drawing on interviews with staff involved in the project, we then explore the challenges and benefits of the project approach. We also discuss how case studies are being developed as part of the project which can be used by others in the sector to Indigenise courses where Indigenous perspectives might not seem an easy ‘fit’. To conclude, we discuss how the approach taken in the project might be used to strengthen Indigenising curriculum across other universities, highlighting the ways Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can work together in the space. Further, we explore how these learnings could be used in other teaching and learning contexts to provide respectful and culturally appropriate ways to enhance student learning about Indigenous histories, cultures and peoples across the disciplines.

About the Project

Indigenising curriculum through the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives and knowledges has become an essential consideration in university curriculum design worldwide (Universities Australia, 2023; The University of Queensland [UQ], 2024). As Al-Natour and Fredericks (2016) note, “Indigenisation refers to a set of complex and challenging processes that benefit Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples within tertiary education” (p. 193; see also Bullen & Flavell, 2022; Bodle & Blue, 2020; Dianati & Bolt, 2025; Gainsford & Evans, 2017). Similar discussions have emerged internationally (see Gumbo, 2016; Zema, 2025). Indigenising the curriculum allows Indigenous students to see themselves in the curriculum (Bunda et al., 2025) and also benefits all students because it enhances understandings of Indigenous ways of knowing across the disciplines and enriches students’ learning experiences.

The task of Indigenising curriculum at The University of Queensland (UQ) was given impetus through Action 14 and the associated deliverables of the *UQ Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan* (RAP) 2019–2022 to “review and facilitate a UQ-wide approach to embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum and inclusive teaching practices in programs” (UQ, 2018, p. 25). Indigenising curriculum continues to be a focus within the *UQ Stretch RAP* 2025–2027 through Action 18: “embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum and inclusive teaching practices in programs” (UQ, 2024, p. 37). This project aimed to enhance the UQ RAP action of Indigenising the curriculum by developing, piloting and evaluating innovative new teaching and learning activities in a number of disciplinary areas:

- historical musicology,
- general science,
- biomedical science,
- veterinary science,
- engineering,
- geography.

In addition, our co-leadership in this space was well established through our co-leadership of the podcast series *Indigenising Curriculum in Practice* (Bunda & Barney, 2023–2025) and a successful previous UQ Teaching Innovation Grant on embedding storying in teaching and learning in Indigenous studies (Bunda et al., 2024). As these disciplinary areas are at the beginning stages of Indigenising their curriculum, the project occurred with this important groundwork and structures already in place.

Additionally, it is important to note the Indigenising curriculum journey at UQ has been influenced nationally by Universities Australia’s *Indigenous Strategy 2022-2025* (2022). The strategy includes commitments that “universities have Indigenous content in curricula that is meaningful, appropriately developed and appropriately resourced” and “universities ensure students graduate with an awareness of Indigenous values and knowledges” (Universities Australia, 2022, p. 55).

The project involved five stages of activities with a focus on interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation throughout, conducted in consultation with an Indigenous reference group. Stage One (June–July 2024) involved appointing an Indigenous research assistant (Allanah Hunt), an Indigenous learning designer (Emily McConochie) and an Indigenous evaluator (Maria

Raciti), undertaking ethical clearance processes (ethics ID: HE000177) and establishing an evaluation framework. Reference group meeting one also occurred in Stage One with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reference group members (Thelma Parker, Carroll-Go Sam, Coen Hird, Deline Briscoe and Cam Raw).

In Stage Two (August 2024–January 2025), Indigenous expertise from project team members (Bunda, Fredericks, Hunt, McConochie and Blue) and the Indigenous reference group (Parker, Go-Sam, Hird, Briscoe and Raw) was combined with the project team through two team workshops. These aimed to develop a range of new discipline-specific Indigenised teaching and learning activities, aligned with course objectives, assessment and Graduate Attributes, to pilot in six courses where Indigenous perspectives were mostly absent.

Stage Three (February–April 2025) involved the course coordinators/lecturers piloting the new innovative Indigenised curriculum activities in their respective courses in Semester 1, 2025. Once ethical clearance was gained, project co-lead Barney or the research assistant (Hunt) undertook interviews with students ($n = 20$) and staff ($n = 9$) to explore their experiences of this new Indigenised curriculum. The practice report presents examples of teaching and learning additions and data from the interviews with staff who coordinated the courses. Thematic analysis of interview data was undertaken using NVivo 12 software.

Case studies on Indigenising the curriculum based on the findings in these six courses (biomedical science, musicology, geography, veterinary science, general science and engineering) were developed in Stage Four (May 2025). Reference group meeting two also occurred in this stage to discuss the initial findings and obtain feedback on case studies. Stage Five (June–November 2025) involved sharing the results through a UQ-wide symposium that brought key stakeholders into conversation to share approaches and further develop approaches to strengthen Indigenising the curriculum across the university. This is discussed further below. The final report was also completed in Stage Five.

An external Indigenous expert with extensive experience in Indigenising the curriculum also provided formative and summative evaluation throughout the project. Maria Raciti (University of the Sunshine Coast) monitored the progress of the project, attended reference group meetings, evaluated the team's engagement of key stakeholders, and provided regular formative feedback to the project team throughout all stages. Engagement and partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people throughout the evaluation was fundamental to ensure it was reflective, responsive, interconnected and followed correct protocols. The evaluation model was refined in collaboration with the reference group and discussed at reference group meetings to ensure accountability and effective use of evaluative data.

Project Deliverables/Outcomes

The UQ-wide symposium held as part of the project was attended by 45 staff members. Each project team member presented on what was embedded in their course, the associated challenges and the benefits of being involved in the project. After each presentation, an Indigenous academic gave their reflections on the presentation and there were group discussions and questions for presenters. The responses from staff captured through the feedback form demonstrated the positive impact of the session. For example, "Excellent to see such a diverse range of disciplines. It was interesting that many of the challenges were common", "There are many ways to achieve this aim. It energises me to see the diverse, creative and authentic ways Indigenous perspectives have been incorporated", "Great value in having the Indigenous reference group to guide and critique everyone's progress", and "There is now support and some fantastic initiatives around UQ". One staff member commented:

For me the need to have governance structures around how we do this so there's a planned and coordinated approach. Also that it's so great to see people having a really genuine and careful approach to their teaching. Would be great to showcase these stories to inspire others that they can do this too!

Staff who attended the symposium also discussed the issues of convincing a small, but resistant, number of students about the value and purpose of embedding Indigenous perspectives in their course and addressing issues of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) within their teaching. Some of these challenges are also documented elsewhere by others (e.g., Howlett et al., 2013). Staff perspectives from interviews are discussed in more depth below.

Teaching and Learning Examples

The discussions at the workshops and reference group meetings led to the development of revised learning objectives and a range of new discipline-specific Indigenised teaching and learning activities and assessment items.

Learning Objectives

All the courses in the project implemented new learning objectives as part of the changes made. There were ongoing, reiterative discussions at the workshops and between the learning designer, project team and course coordinators about the language/terms used in the learning objectives depending on the course context, year level and focus. Examples included:

Develop an awareness of the importance of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and global Indigenous peoples' values, cultures and knowledges and how this relates to being a contemporary scientist. (first year course focused on theory and practice in science)

Demonstrate cultural capability through understanding of, and respect for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and global Indigenous musical traditions, heritage, and knowledge. (second year musicology course)

Consider the importance of Country for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and outline impacts of engineering projects on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. (second year engineering course)

Describe Indigenous concepts of Country and the role of Indigenous communities in shaping past and contemporary environments. (first year geography course)

Adding new learning objectives ensured that the changes would be implemented to support scaffolded learning and that Indigenous perspectives were embedded across the courses.

Teaching Activities and Assessments

Each of the courses also included new teaching and learning activities and new assessment to ensure alignment of learning objectives and teaching assessment with explicit disciplinary reframing. Examples included:

First year biomedical science course: Three new two-hour workshops focused on cultural capability, including Indigenous perspectives on health and wellbeing, and cultural capability in healthcare. These were embedded in Weeks 4, 9 and 13 and led by the non-Indigenous lecturer. New assessment linked with these workshops was delivered via in-class short answer assessments across the semester which contributed to the final grade. This ensured scaffolded, repeated exposure across the semester with progressive development of student cultural capability.

Second year engineering course: New structured classroom activities were embedded, including an in-class session with an Indigenous industry expert, a Welcome to Country while visiting a site and discipline-relevant case study materials (focused on mining and supply chains). An assessment was also added, with students required to analyse environmental and social impacts of engineering processes on Indigenous peoples and explicitly reference how the regions and peoples are impacted through the material supply chain.

Second year musicology course: New teaching activities were embedded, including a Week 4 workshop led by the non-Indigenous coordinator. This discussed staff and student positioning (Who are you? Where did you grow up? Do you know who the traditional owners of the area are?), the importance of reconciliation at UQ and the absence of Indigenous perspectives in early music. Additional integrated topics included a focus on cultural loss and remembrance, cultural misappropriation and Indigenous music beyond Australia. A new assessment-linked activity was also added which involved a reading response task that required students to compare an Indigenous author and non-Indigenous author with a focus on archival research approaches.

These examples highlight ways to embed Indigenous perspectives into core disciplinary analysis and assessment, rather than as an 'add-on'.

Reflections From Staff

Interviews with nine of the teaching staff (eight non-Indigenous staff members and one Indigenous staff member) involved in the project were undertaken. Many of the non-Indigenous staff involved in the project were eager to embed Indigenous perspectives in their respective courses but were "hesitant" at its commencement:

I worry that I'm not the right person to talk about stuff. So, I think what I really tried to do is frame things up in a way, the positionality ... I need to get over that personal barrier of sort of, yeah, the positionality. Not overstepping, being clear about my role, and my experiences. (Staff 2)

I don't feel really qualified to cover some of the content that would be important or relevant to cover. So no, not confident. (Staff 8)

This is aligned with the literature more broadly which notes that non-Indigenous staff often feel hesitant about embedding Indigenous perspectives into their teaching or concerned about getting it wrong (see e.g., Howlett et al., 2013). However, one of the benefits of the project was that it empowered staff by building their confidence in Indigenising the curriculum:

I found the participation in the Teaching Innovation Grant project was a lever to increase confidence and combine it with useful new methodologies. (Staff 1)

I think as we had more and more meetings and talked about things and they [the teaching staff involved in each course] engaged with the overall feel of the project much more, their level of confidence to speak and ask questions really improved. I really noticed a change in the level of engagement of academic staff. (Staff 7)

The meetings with the Indigenous reference group, workshops with the whole project team and one-on-one meetings between teaching staff and the Indigenous learning designer (McConochie) enabled interdisciplinary collaboration and new learnings:

Having our collective meetings with like-minded colleagues involved in the grant across the university was fantastic. It was just an ideal opportunity to learn and shape your own thoughts and build on your own identity for that matter as well. Having the Indigenous reference group as part of our meetings was simply fantastic. (Staff 1)

Anyone who's doing it, if you had to do it in isolation would feel probably even more intimidated. (Staff 8)

One of the challenges staff perceived was that embedding new Indigenous perspectives could be viewed as an “add on” rather than being deeply embedded in the course:

How can we make that relevant to the cohort that we're teaching? ... There was finding content that was relevant to [the course]. And as I said I don't feel like we really nailed that ... It feels a little bit added on. (Staff 5)

There's always concerns about how well-embedded it is throughout the course, and that's still a work in progress for us. (Staff 6)

Some staff noted that a small number of students questioned the relevance of the new Indigenised content in some courses:

There were a lot of students who were saying they weren't sure why it was relevant. (Staff 3)

I think they also found it a bit jolting, the difference between what we were teaching versus the rest of the course, because there wasn't that smooth kind of integration of things that's needed to give a nice coherent picture. Some students could not see the relevance, even when it was sort of right in front of them. (Staff 7)

Additionally, staff discussed the potential implications for staff workload, the issues of finding ‘space’ in already ‘full’ courses, and the challenge of how to make it sustainable to implement Indigenised curriculum:

What I think we need to think about is almost like succession planning for the course. Because we run through all three semesters of the year, and in Semester 1 we have three streams, which means of the lectures. So that's quite a lot of work in a short period, just in a little bit, for [particular staff] to come in and do. (Staff 6)

Long term sustainable delivery. Then how to integrate this, and whether the most appropriate way is to continue with outside expert input, which isn't really what we do for most other courses. Then by doing that, it already feels there's a risk then. (Staff 8)

Discussion

While the non-Indigenous staff involved in the project were keen to Indigenise their curriculum, they were often unsure where to start and concerned about getting it wrong (see Howlett et al., 2013). However, the methodological approach of meetings with an Indigenous reference group, team workshops and working closely with an Indigenous learning designer allowed non-Indigenous staff to receive feedback on their ideas and receive other suggestions and resources to include in their courses. It provided a safe space where non-Indigenous staff felt comfortable to make mistakes without being condemned. The importance of evaluation, led by an Indigenous evaluator (Raciti), and analysis also ensured reflection through all stages of the project. The reluctance among non-Indigenous teaching staff to embed Indigenous perspectives is both common and anticipated. Staff concerns centred on positionality, legitimacy and a fear of cultural overreach rather than opposition to Indigenising the curriculum. Such hesitancy reflects a broader structural and historical context in which Indigenous knowledges have been marginalised within higher education. Importantly, the findings suggest that uncertainty should be

understood as a necessary entry point to ethical curriculum transformation, rather than a deficit to be overcome through compliance.

In addition, participation in the project functioned as a catalyst for change by offering a formal structure, institutional recognition and scaffolded support. Over time, staff reported increased confidence, improved capacity to engage with Indigenous content and greater willingness to ask critical questions. This indicates that confidence in Indigenising practice is developed through sustained engagement and learning opportunities, rather than individual goodwill or ad hoc professional development. The findings also demonstrate that Indigenising curriculum work is significantly strengthened when undertaken collaboratively. The process of interdisciplinary collaboration in the project provided deep support to the staff involved. As Nagelhout and Carradini (2026) note, “the success of interdisciplinary initiatives depends heavily on collaboration, which relies more on human relationships and intangibles like trust” (p. 3). Interdisciplinary collaborations in teaching and learning spaces have the potential to spark innovation and complex problem solving. However, as Nagelhout and Carradini (2026) also note, there are potential challenges in interdisciplinary work such as the need for committed resources and a cohesive vision. Certainly, the staff involved in the project all had a collaborative commitment to Indigenise the curriculum and we were fortunate to have university grant funding for the project. This approach could be replicated as a model at other universities. It demonstrates ways that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can work closely and respectfully together towards a common goal of embedding Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum. The examples included in this practice report have the potential to help build the confidence of non-Indigenous academic staff at other institutions and strengthen understandings of pedagogical processes and the benefits of embedding Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum.

Conclusion

The project demonstrates that Indigenisation of the curriculum can be achieved through collaboration and sustained engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators. While implementation will vary depending on institutional and disciplinary contexts, the following steps provide a flexible framework that can be adapted to different settings:

1. *Work collaboratively*: Non-Indigenous academics should engage with Indigenous colleagues, advisors or community members; draw on institutional supports (learning designers, working groups and/or communities of practice); build discipline-specific collaborations to ensure course relevance.
2. *Prepare and support non-Indigenous teaching staff*: Provide training or briefing for tutors and teaching staff; share clear materials and guidance to support delivery; acknowledge and address staff confidence and capability needs.
3. *Revise the learning objectives*: Revise and/or add learning objectives that explicitly reference cultural capability, Indigenous knowledges and perspectives, and relevance to professional or disciplinary practice; ensure objectives go beyond awareness to include application, analysis or evaluation; align new objectives with existing course aims (so they are integrated, not additional).
4. *Align the teaching activities with the revised objectives*: Introduce dedicated teaching moments (e.g., lectures, workshops and/or tutorials); embed Indigenous perspectives into core topics, not as a standalone week; use discipline-specific examples (e.g., science, engineering, music or health); include active learning approaches, such as group research tasks, ‘think-pair-share’ activities, guided discussions or reflections; incorporate relational pedagogies (e.g., discuss lecturer/student positioning, context setting).
5. *Use relevant case studies and content*: Where possible, include Indigenous guest expertise or Indigenous voices; select examples that connect Indigenous perspectives to real disciplinary issues (e.g., scientific knowledge systems, land management, cultural production or healthcare practice); use case studies that highlight relationships to Country, cultural knowledge systems and social, environmental or ethical impacts.
6. *Integrate assessment*: Design tasks that require meaningful engagement with Indigenous perspectives, such as comparative analysis (Indigenous/non-Indigenous approaches), case-based problem solving and reflective responses linked to disciplinary practice; ensure assessment criteria reflect the revised learning objectives and embed these tasks within existing assessment structures where possible.

7. *Scaffold learning across the semester*: Avoid one-off activities and plan for multiple points of engagement; sequence content to build from introduction to application to reflection; revisit key ideas (e.g., Country, knowledge systems and cultural capability) across topics; use workshops, lectures and assessments to reinforce learning over time.
8. *Reflect and refine*: Gather student and staff feedback on new activities; identify the challenges (e.g., relevance, confidence and depth of understanding); adjust content, sequencing and support accordingly and plan for sustained delivery and ongoing development.

Indigenising the curriculum is an ongoing, iterative process. Staff recognised improvements but also acknowledged “work in progress”, highlighting the need for patience, reflection and continual refinement. Success should be measured in learning, relationship building and gradual transformation. Collaboration across difference and disciplines, with trust and respect, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is one approach that has the potential to transform student and staff understandings about Indigenous cultures, peoples and histories.

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