National IECB Network Position Paper

Introduction
The National IECB Network refers to the collective grouping of the six state and two territory Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECB). Across Australia, IECBs are the peak community advocacy and advisory body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education within their jurisdiction. IECB Chairs and Presidents hold numerous positions on local, state and national boards and advisory groups, such as the First Peoples Education Advisory Group and the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood.

Whilst individual IECBs deal primarily with state and territory departments of education and local education and training providers, as a national network IECBs’ principal relationship and line of communication is with the federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). IECBs receive funding from DEEWR to implement specific education-based programs within their jurisdiction, such as the Parent and Community Engagement (PaCE) program, and to meet as a national network and with DEEWR representatives several times annually.

Background
“Cultural competence is the ability to understand and value Indigenous perspectives. It provides the basis upon which Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians may engage positively in a spirit of mutual respect and reconciliation.” (Universities Australia 2011)

In April 2012, the National IECB Network met in Melbourne over three days to discuss a variety of issues in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. An important agenda item was a workshop around three key topics:

1. Pre-service teacher training;
2. Professional development and cultural competency in schools; and
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies.

This discussion centred on the significant developments currently occurring in the education sector, including the introduction of the Australian Curriculum and the National Professional Standards for Teachers; both of which introduce specific requirements and expectations around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders studies and students.

This position paper is a result of that discussion and sets out the formal, collective position of the National IECB Network on the three issues identified above.
1. Pre-service teacher training

Australia’s Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies have been calling on teacher education institutions to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies into the teacher education curriculum since the 1970s. In 1988 the Hughes Report¹ similarly identified this need, and in 1991 the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody recommended that ‘all teacher-training courses include courses which will enable student teachers to understand that Australia has an Aboriginal history and Aboriginal viewpoints on social, cultural and historic matters, and to teach the curriculum which reflects those matters’². In 2002 the Australian Education Union recommended that:

- all teachers employed in the education sector in Australia complete a minimum number of Indigenous Studies subjects (including cultural awareness, teaching and learning, and language numeracy and literacy) as a requirement for their employment into the teaching profession; and

- all undergraduate and post-graduate teacher education programmes build into their course frameworks significant and assessable mandatory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies units.

(Australian Education Union 2002)

Currently, there is no consistent approach to the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander study units or courses in Australian universities. Ma Rhea and Russell (2012) highlight this lack of consensus amongst universities by noting that ‘Australian Indigenous Studies... has found a home nestled within Education and Arts faculties only to be shifted to autonomous centres and on occasion back into faculty structures’³. Despite the above research and recommendations, few universities mandate that their pre-service teaching students undertake Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander study units. The recently released ‘Guiding Principles for the Development of Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities’ by Universities Australia, which recommends embedding Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in all curricula, have in fact been criticised as politicising curriculum and causing ‘culture wars’⁴. Such claims discount the significance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in Australia, from both an historical perspective and a contemporary one in terms of creating a culture of inclusion in the higher education sector and boosting participation in tertiary studies. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies is not just relevant to a minority of students interested in or coming from this cultural background, it is the precedential history of Australia that is the starting point for the society that all Australians live in today, and is a critical field of academic study. Moreover, the allegation of ‘culture wars’ is fundamentally flawed in that it assumes it is possible to have a curriculum that is ‘culture neutral’ and apolitical, disregarding the fact that current curriculum content is developed entirely from a Western perspective.

⁴ The Australian, 16 January 2012, ‘Indigenous focus at universities raises ‘culture war’ worry’.
“[Universities should] include Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in all curricula to provide students with the knowledge, skills and understandings which form the foundations of indigenous cultural competency.”

(Universities Australia 2011)

The National IECB Network supports the guidelines put forward by Universities Australia, particularly the recommendation to ‘include Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in all curricula to provide students with the knowledge, skills and understandings which form the foundations of indigenous cultural competency’. Teachers leaving the university system with a greater level of education in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and perspectives are much better placed to impact positively on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, while improving the cultural knowledge of all students.

The Federal Government commissioned report ‘Teaching the teachers mandatory Aboriginal studies’ (2005) found that mandatory studies for pre-service teachers impacted positively on:

- pre-service teachers’ knowledge of subject matter
- Aboriginal Studies teaching self-concepts in a range of desirable self-concept facets
- values in regard to teaching both Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students
- pre-service teachers’ perceptions of the extent to which they intend to teach their future students Aboriginal Studies
- their perceived ability to implement departmental requirements.

Mandatory Aboriginal studies subjects were found to have a significant positive impact on both cognitive (knowledge) and affective (enjoyment and appreciation) components of self-concept, and pre-service teachers who had undertaken mandatory subjects felt they were more capable of teaching Aboriginal students and Aboriginal Studies and were more likely to enjoy doing so. Moreover there was unanimous agreement from heads of schools, directors of education and teacher educators involved in the research that ‘Aboriginal Studies was an essential component of pre-service primary teacher education, that Aboriginal Studies was highly relevant to teaching and the school curricula, and an important ingredient in fostering Reconciliation within universities, schools and the wider community’.

The National IECB Network acknowledges that pre-service teacher training is a national issue, and ensuring a consistent and comprehensive national approach is required if we are to build a more inclusive and culturally competent Australian education sector. However it should also be noted that the statutory authorities for teaching in each state and territory have a role to play in introducing requirements around pre-service teacher training in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies as a condition of employment into the sector. The importance of such an approach is augmented by the fact that both the National Curriculum and National Teacher Quality Standards will require teachers

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to be competent and confident in teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies in a genuine way that demonstrates their knowledge of culture and history.

It is the National IECB Network’s position that all Australian universities must mandate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander study units not only within all teaching and education courses, but embed these units across all aspects of the curriculum. This is in recognition of the fact that it is the role of the higher education sector to address past deficiencies in education with regard to the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and perspectives. As stated by Professor Peter Lee, vice-chancellor of Southern Cross University, ‘If we are to build an inclusive society then it is important that all graduates have a perspective on indigenous cultural competency, not just leave it to those who are studying indigenous issues.’

RECOMMENDATION 1: That all Australian Universities mandate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander study units within all pre-service teacher and education courses.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the Universities Australia’s (2011) ‘Guiding Principles’ and recommendation to embed Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives across all undergraduate courses be adopted by all Australian Universities.

2. Professional development and cultural competency in schools

There is a significant body of research in Australia that considers the effectiveness of professional development trainings with a cross-cultural or cultural competence focus. The term ‘cultural competence’ encompasses acknowledgement of diversity, differences and similarities between cultures (cultural knowledge) yet shifts focus from learned cultural knowledge to skill and ability to transform knowledge into practice. Universities Australia defines Indigenous cultural competence as ‘the ability to understand and value Indigenous perspectives. It provides the basis upon which Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians may engage positively in a spirit of mutual respect and reconciliation’. The National IECB Network advocates for teacher professional development in this area to encompass learning’s relating to both one’s own culture (challenging one’s own cultural preconceptions and assumed knowledges) and the multiple forms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures from both historic and contemporary perspectives; engendering both individual behavioural change and change at the systemic level.

Current research examining current and future professional development and learning opportunities for in-service teachers in Australia reveals no evidence of Australian government policy or resourcing

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8 See:


commitment with respect to teacher professional development in the Indigenous domain\textsuperscript{11}. Despite the impending implementation of the Australian Curriculum and National Professional Standards for Teachers, there is a lack of systemic planning for teacher professional development in this area and limited rigorous evaluation of these programs. Concerningly, there has also been a significant drop off in teacher demand for formal professional development with an Indigenous pedagogy focus in the past 12 months\textsuperscript{12}.

The National IECB Network believes that the overall lack of cohesiveness in development and planning for increasing teachers’ skills and knowledge in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education needs to be rigorously addressed, and should be done so in response to two specific standards within the National Professional Standards for Teachers. Standards 1.4 and 2.4 below clearly outline the expectations of teachers in this area, according to the level and position of the teacher:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus area</th>
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<tr>
<td>1.4 Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students</td>
<td>Demonstrate broad knowledge and understanding of the impact of culture, cultural identity and linguistic background on the education of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.</td>
<td>Design and implement effective teaching strategies that are responsive to the local community and cultural setting, linguistic background and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.</td>
<td>Provide advice and support colleagues in the implementation of effective teaching strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students using knowledge of and support from community representatives.</td>
<td>Develop teaching programs that support equitable and ongoing participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by engaging in collaborative relationships with community representatives and parents/carers.</td>
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\textsuperscript{11} Ma Rhae Z., Presentation to the AITSL project steering group (May 2012).

\textsuperscript{12} Ma Rhae Z., Presentation to the AITSL project steering group (May 2012).
### Standard 2 – Know the content and how to teach it

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<td><strong>2.4 Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians</strong></td>
<td>Demonstrate broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.</td>
<td>Provide opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.</td>
<td>Support colleagues with providing opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.</td>
<td>Lead initiatives to assist colleagues with opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.</td>
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(Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2011)

The National IECB Network supports the implementation of these national standards which can only be achieved if the Australian teaching workforce is supported with robust cultural competency training and professional development delivered with consistency across jurisdictions, while also being adaptable to incorporate local history and perspectives. This training needs to be ongoing throughout the professional career of teachers, and should be extended to all education staff, including principals, reception and student support officers and department employees, as a mandatory requirement to employment within the schools system. This is an essential step in supporting a quality teaching workforce, fostering reconciliation and combating racism in Australian society.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** That the Australian teaching workforce be required to undertake robust cultural competency training and professional development on an ongoing basis throughout their career. This training should be delivered systematically in line with standards 1.4 and 2.4 of the National Professional Standards for Teachers.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** That all education staff within the Australian schools system be required as a condition of employment to undertake robust cultural competency training on an ongoing basis throughout their career.

### 3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

The Australian education sector has a long history of oversight in acknowledging the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture in contemporary society. Aboriginal studies were first introduced in schools in the 1980’s, after the first Indigenous Education Policy (IEP) was developed by the National Aboriginal Education Committee. The IEP ‘emphasised the importance of building on cultural heritage, the importance of Indigenous studies for all Australian people,
promotion of cross-cultural understanding, skills acquisition, and Aboriginal people’s involvement in managing their own education. These intentions continue to be replicated in current Indigenous education policies, reflecting the continual struggle of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in achieving equality and representation in the education sector. In 1989, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEAP) was developed, which again aimed to make Aboriginal heritage a part of all school curricula for all students to increase cross-cultural understanding. The NATSIEAP was revised in 1997 and again in 2010 as the ATSIEAP 2010-2014, which is the current overarching policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

The cross-curriculum priority area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures within the Australian Curriculum thus constitutes an unprecedented focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies in the Australian education system. The priority placed on this topic area can be seen as a response to a palpable gap in the education of past generations of Australians, described above, and operationalises the commitment within the Melbourne Declaration for all Australian children to ‘understand and acknowledge the value of Indigenous cultures and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians’.

The National IECB Network acknowledges that in order to develop a legitimate content for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community will need to play a significant role in the creation and delivery of these units in the curriculum; providing cultural information, knowledge and perspectives that accurately represent the local community. In the absence of a single, unified ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective’, even at the local level, these studies units will need to involve a coordinated approach to the several different histories and beliefs that may exist within one area. The question of which members of the Community to engage for education support and cultural knowledge may also pose challenges, especially within communities where there exist several different traditional tribal groups. The National IECB Network would be able to play a valuable role in addressing such issues and acting as an intermediary or common point of contact between schools and the Community, however additional resources and support would be required in order to actively provide this advice and service.

The National IECB Network believes that involving the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community and acknowledging their central role is vital to ensuring the legitimacy of policy implementation on the ground as well as the longevity of a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander focus in the education sector. For many members of the Community, they will see their role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies as an inherent individual responsibility to strengthen and maintain community cohesion and wellbeing. Despite this perception of social responsibility,

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13 Partington G. (1998). ‘In those days it was that rough’, Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, p. 49.
the National IECB Network strongly advocates that the contributions of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community need to be properly acknowledged and compensated for in order to reflect the true value of these services to the education sector and to the successful implementation of these policies more specifically.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:** That Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies units, required under the National Curriculum, be developed and delivered in partnership with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community members and attract appropriate remuneration.

**RECOMMENDATION 6:** That the National IECB Network be utilised as an intermediary where needed to facilitate contact between schools and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community, and are supported with the resources necessary to actively provide this advice and service.

**Conclusion**

Below is a summary of the National IECB Networks recommendations pertaining to pre-service teacher training (Recommendation 1 and 2), professional development and cultural competency in schools (Recommendation 3 and 4) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies (Recommendation 5 and 6). In light of the current changes being undertaken in Australia’s education sector, in particular the increased focus and expectations placed on the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories in schools, the National IECB Network strongly advocates the need for these recommendations to be taken up in order to better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and reconciliation more broadly.

### Summary of National IECB Network Recommendations:

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